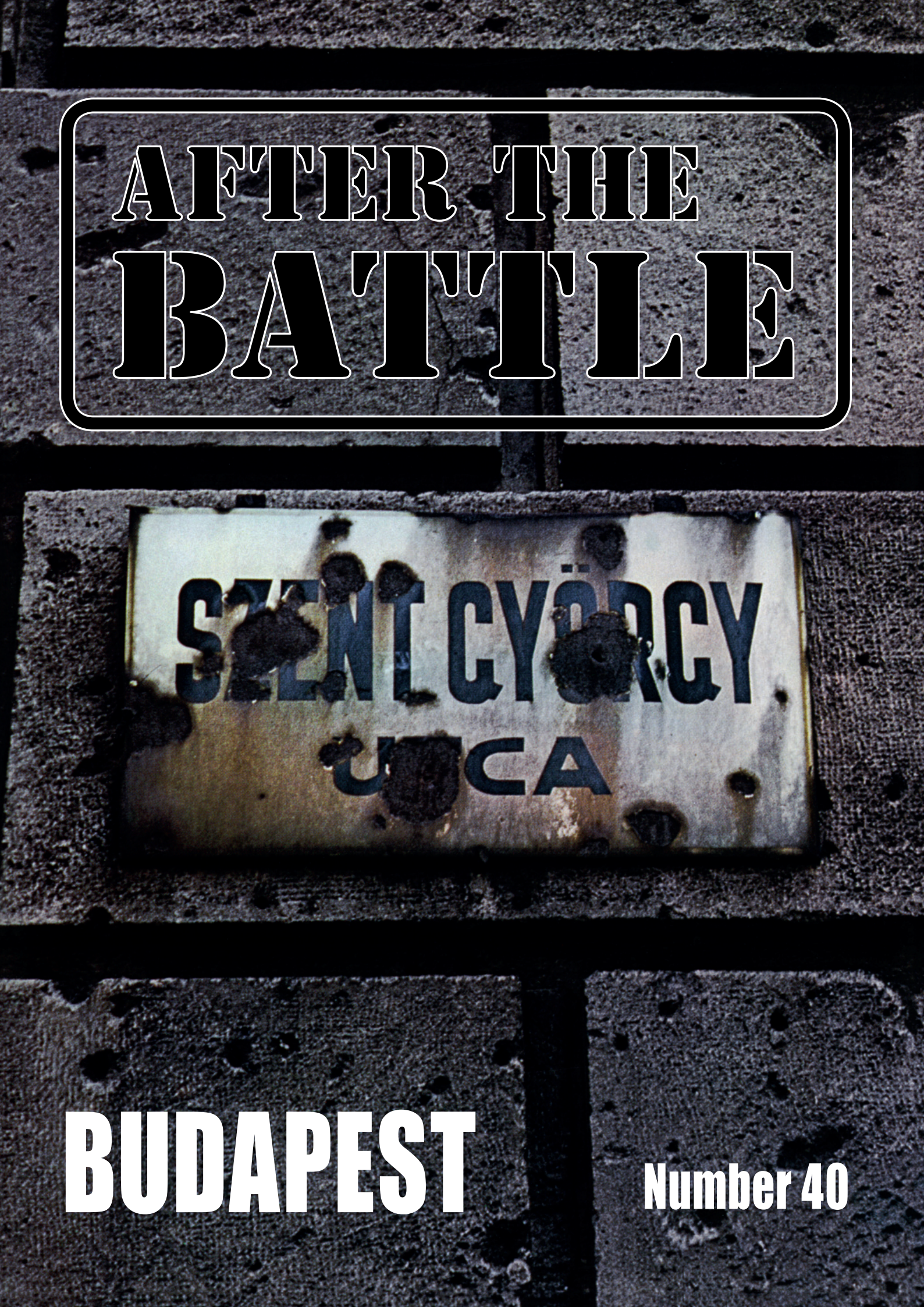
# AFTER THE BATTLE




# BUDAPEST

Number 40

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# CONTENTS

**BUDAPEST** 1
Operation Margarethe 2
The Operation and its Aftermath 9
Operation Panzerfaust 12

**WAR FILM**
*The Battle of the River Plate* 28
The Battle 33
The Trap 36

**PRESERVATION**
The *Graf Spee*–what now remains? 38

**IT HAPPENED HERE**
Night Solo to Eternity 40

**CRIME IN WWII**
The Death of Joachim Peiper 47

**Front Cover:** Battle damage still visible in Budapest on Szent György utca beside the partly demolished, former government buildings on the Burgberg in Budapest. Although the street no longer exists as such, it can be seen as it was in 1944 in the picture on page 15.

**Centre Pages:** 'In Erinnerung an unseren Kommandanten und Gefallene Kamaraden Speegruppe San Juan 1939 — Dezember — 1969.' So reads the inscription on the grave of Kommandant Hans Langsdorff in the German Cemetery, Buenos Aires. With him are four of his crewmen. L-R: Oberbootsmannsmaat Johannes Eggers (died October 17, 1944); Maschinemaat Wolfgang Beyrich (died August 13, 1941); Matrosenobergefreiter Josef Schneider (died May 31, 1941); and Mechanikerobergefreiter Peter Kranen (died May 21, 1942). (Gabriel Lladó)

**Back Cover:** It has been rumoured that the *Tacoma*, now firmly embedded in the mud, may end her days in Hamburg as a museum ship.

**Acknowledgements:** Extract on pages 14-18 from *Skorzeny's Special Missions* by Otto Skorzeny, published by Robert Hale Limited, 1977. Background material for the career of Joachim Peiper is based on *Crossroads of Death: The story of the Malmedy Massacre* by James J. Weingartner, published by the Berkeley University of California Press 1973.

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**The German bloodless take-over of Hungary in 1944 culminated with the entry into the capital Budapest on the morning of March 26. In a show of strength, 16. SS-Panzer Grenadier Division crossed Margaret bridge at 11.00 a.m.**

*Top:* **Kfz 16s, clearly bearing their tactical signs on their front wings, and** *above* **Opel Blitz trucks and Schwimmwagen. Trams were running as normal. (ECP Armées)**

**Margit hid today looking west towards the Buda hills. No. 6 tram still runs on the same track.**

# BUDAPEST

## BY JEAN PAUL PALLUD

**The city acquired its name in 1873 with the amalgamation of the communities of Buda (on the west bank of the Danube) with Pest (east bank). Here a Sturmbannführer (possibly Cantow) leads the column in his late-1930s Pininfarina-bodied Fiat 1500 cabriolet.**

One of the most significant repercussions of the First World War was the extent to which the victors redrew national boundaries in Europe. Germany and her allies were each affected to varying degrees but none worse than Hungary which, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon in June 1920, lost more than two-thirds of its territory. Reduced from 125,641 square miles in the pre-1914 days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it shrank to a mere 35,893 square miles — Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia taking the lion's share with lesser fragments going to Austria, Poland and Italy. As a result, Hungary's pre-war population decreased from more than twenty million to 7½ million, losing in the process over three million Magyars of the mother tongue. The treaty also provided for unspecified reparations and strictly limited the size of the armed forces.

Just as Germany, even more so after the emergence of Hitler, despised the so-called injustices of the Treaty of Versailles, so Hungarians angered under the Trianon treaty which had effectively destroyed their country. The inter-war period was one of extreme confusion, unrest and bitterness. Not only was the country saddled with the burden of half-a-million refugees from the successor states but the people were split over the rightful position of King Charles following his declaration of a republic in November 1918. An interim measure was to elect a regent as provisional head of state and Admiral Miklos Horthy took office in March 1920.

A treaty of friendship signed with Italy in 1927 presaged a gradual shift into the Axis camp, accelerated by the rejection of Hungarian claims over Czechoslovakia by the Western Allies in 1938. On the other hand, Germany and Italy ceded Hungary the southern fringe of Slovakia and a second 'Vienna Award' in August 1940 covered northern Transylvania. Although Horthy had tried to keep his country out of the war, and had refused Germany permission to move its forces across Hungarian soil during the attack on Poland the previous year, now he relented and allowed German troops to cross into Romania. The signing of the Tripartite Pact in November was yet another step down the slippery slope as was the ill-fated Treaty of Eternal Friendship made with Yugoslavia. When the Yugoslav government was overturned in favour of a pro-Western one in March 1941, Hitler called on Hungary to join him in an invasion. Once again Hungary receded from the ultimate decision and merely allowed passage across its territory but when Germany attacked Russia in June, Hungary supplied a token force for what they thought would be yet another quick German conquest.

Finally committed to the Axis cause, the strength of Soviet resistance resulted in Hitler forcing the Hungarians to throw in its entire armed forces at the beginning of 1942. With Great Britain allied to the USSR against the common enemy, having declared war on Hungary the month before, and the latter reciprocating against the United States, the Hungarians were well and truly committed.

Horthy, however, still believed that the Allies would, in the end, be victorious and he was anxious to leave a lifeline open to the West. With the appointment of a man as prime minister who shared the same views — Miklós Kállay — for two years Hungary successfully walked the tightrope. With the Hungarians soundly defeated in the East at Voronezh in January 1943, Kállay let it be known in the West that he would surrender unconditionally when Allied troops reached his borders.

With Germany's defeats on the Soviet front mounting, Hitler was increasingly concerned over the loyalty of his dubious ally on his southern flank. By March 1944 Hitler could tolerate the situation no longer and on the 18th he met with Horthy to offer him a straight choice: either he co-operate fully with Germany or Hungary would be occupied as if an enemy country. In reality Hitler's offer of a choice was a sham as the latter had already issued instructions for the German take-over to begin in the early hours of the following day; so swift was the operation that by the time Horthy reached Budapest, just before noon on the 19th, he found a German honour guard all lined up at the station to greet him!

**Hungarian soldiers 'somewhere on the Eastern Front'. (ECP Armées)**

# OPERATION MARGARETHE

### THE SOUTHERN PRONG: XXII. GEB. ARMEEKORPS

Operation Margarethe — the code-name for the German plan for military occupation — had, in fact, been conceived the previous autumn when Hungary appeared to be a likely candidate for desertion from the German camp. It was executed under the responsibility of the Oberbefehlshaber Südost — the commanding general south-east — Generalfeldmarschall von Weichs. An organisation had been set up in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, to prepare, then lead, the operation commanded by Generalleutnant Foertsch. During the preparatory phase the operation was known as 'Arbeitsstab Foertsch' but became 'Operationsstab Margarethe' once the invasion had begun.

As the overall forces allocated to Margarethe were insufficient to cover the entire country, the aim was to occupy only the vital western part as far as the Tisza river which would become a line of defence against Hungarian troops garrisoned in the east. The invasion was to be launched from four directions simultaneously, each by motorised troops as speed would be a critical factor.

To deal with any reaction from the Hungarian government (or Honved), it was very important to be in position to occupy the key points in Budapest in the early hours of the first day. For that purpose, a special operation had been organised on the Trojan Horse concept. Troops, to all intents and purposes in transit through Hungary, would by chance find themselves in Budapest on the eve of the operation and thus in place to control the town. Aptly named Trojanische Pferd, it was planned under the command of Generalmajor von Pfuhlstein, commander of the famous Brandenburg Division. One convoy would leave Belgrade north for Germany with the bulk of 4. Rgt. Brandenburg while another would leave Vienna eastwards for Romania with elements of the Panzer Lehrdivision. Both convoys would arrive in Budapest area by evening of March 18. At the same time, the paratroopers of Fallschirmjäger-Btl. Brandenburg, operating from Brünn, near Vienna, would seize the airfield at Budaörs either by landing from their Ju 52s or by parachuting in.

To ensure efficient communications between the various units, a small signals unit from the division travelled by train to Budapest together with their radio apparatus and by March 16 was already set up for work in an hotel room!

XXII. Geb. Armeekorps was in charge of the invasion in the south from occupied Serbia. As the korps was already engaged in the preparation of Operation Cannae against Tito's partisans, the preparations for Operation Margarethe were easily disguised as part of the former. The actual orders for the move toward the Hungarian border were issued only twelve hours before the beginning of Operation Margarethe. Three battlegroups (Kampfgruppen) had been set up, each of them faced with the task of seizing bridges, either over the Tisza or Drava rivers.

**Kampfgruppe Hildebrandt**, under the command of Oberst von Hildebrandt, commander of Gren.Rgt. (mot) 92, was composed of the following units:

Gren.Rgt. (mot) 92
III./4.Rgt. Brandenburg
Pi.Btl. (mot) 45 (minus one company and two platoons)
Pz.Abt. 202 (minus two companies)
Stu.Gesch.Brig. 201 (minus two battalions)
Brüko (mot) B 658
SS Pol.Rgt. 5
II./Flak Rgt. (mot) 25

Their target was the Tisza bridge near Titel. Once captured, the Kampfgruppe would cross over it into Hungary and move north along the west bank of the river. En route, all the other Tisza bridges had to be secured and parties left to cover the flank of the korps from the confluence with the Danube river to Szolnok east of Budapest. The bulk of the Kampfgruppe would move through Szeged and Kecskemét, seizing the airfields and neutralizing the garrisons in these towns while a secondary thrust would deal with Cegled and the airfield at Szolnok where 1,200 Luftwaffe troops were stationed.

**Kampfgruppe Brauner** under the command of Generalleutnant Brauner, commander of the 42. Jg.Div. comprised the following units split into 'road' and 'railway' teams:

42. Jg.Div. (only the 'mobile' units)
Brüko (mot) B 2/402
I./Flak Rgt. (mot) 6
1./Pi.Btl. (mot) 45
one transport train with a battalion of 100. Jg.Div.
armoured train Panzerzug 64
armoured train 1e.Panzerzug (1e.Sp.) 301

Kampfgruppe Brauner's first objective was the road and railway bridges over the Drava river in Neusatz, Yugoslavia (now Novi-Sad), which had to be secured undamaged, and the town and that part of the Danube flotilla stationed there had to be taken. Then, two teams of the Kampfgruppe would then move north along parallel roads and railway lines to reach the border town of Maria Theresiopel (Subotica). There the important railway station and the industrial area near the town had to be secured. While the 'road' part of the Kampfgruppe would thrust toward

**Shaky allies yet brothers in arms. Panzer crews, Hungarian on the left and German on the right, exchange greetings beside a German PzKpfw IV. (ECP Armées)**

Tisza bridge — initial objective for Kampfgruppe Hildebrandt.

Kampfgruppe Streckenbach's bridge over the Danube at Baja.

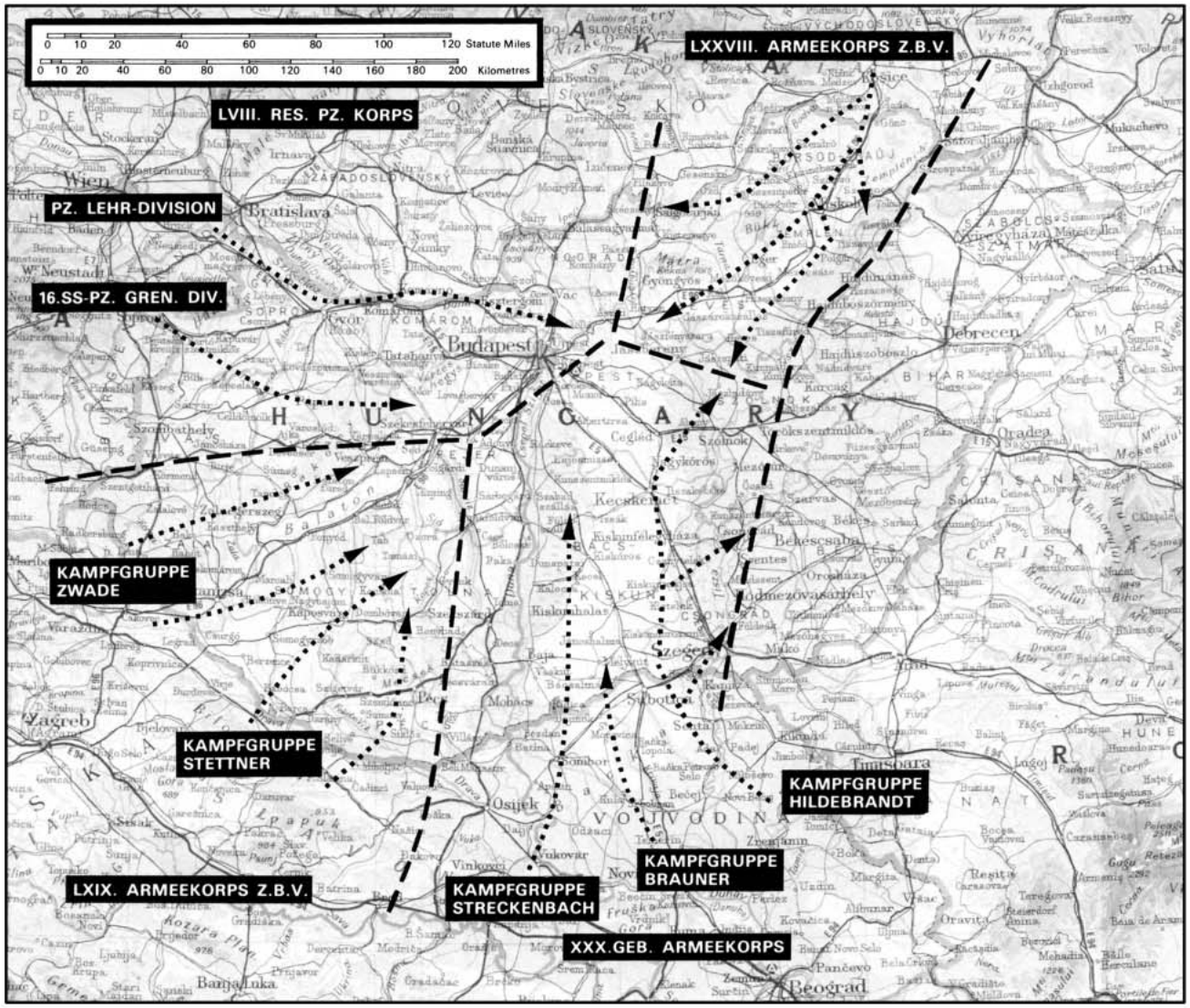
Kiskunhalas, the railway vanguard battalion would push on, according to tactical demands, north towards Budapest, east to Szeged or west towards Baja.

**Kampfgruppe Streckenbach.** This unit was composed of the motorised elements of the 8. SS-Kav.Div. Florian Geyer and was under the command of SS-Oberführer Streckenbach, commander of the division. This Kampfgruppe had to capture the Drava bridges in Esseg, Yugoslavia (Osijek) and move north through Mohacs towards Baja where the garrison and craft of the Danube flotilla had to be neutralized. From there the Kampfgruppe would split into two groups, one on each side of the Danube, and move north again toward Dunaföldvár and Budapest. The Drava bridges at Esseg and the Danube bridges at Baja and Dunaföldvár had to be secured, for, early on the first day the railway vanguard battalion of its neighbour on the left flank, Kampfgruppe Stettner (see below), would have to cross the Drava at Esseg before moving north-west out of the Kampfgruppe Streckenbach sector.

## THE SOUTH-WESTERN PRONG: LXIX. ARMEEKORPS Z.B.V.

LXIX. Armeekorps z.b.V. was in charge of the invasion in the south-west of Hungary from Croatia. Two Kampfgruppen had been organised, like those of XXII. Geb. Armeekorps, to secure undamaged bridges over the Drava river.

**Operation Margarethe, March 1944. Post-war map reproduced with acknowledgement to John Bartholomew & Son.**



**A Sturmgeschutz of Stu.Gesch. Brigade 201 (part of Kampfgruppe Hildebrandt) in the area of Szolnok. ('Kozseghaza' means 'town hall'.) (ECP Armées)**

**Kampfgruppe Stettner**, under the command of Generalleutnant Stettner Ritter von Grabenhofen, commander of the 1. Geb.Div., was composed of the following units:

1. Geb.Div. (without one battalion)
Brüko (mot) B 42
one transport train with a battalion of the 1. Geb.Div.
armoured train Panzerzug 23
armoured train Panzerzug 65

Having crossed the Drava river at Donji Miholjac and Virovitica, the Kampfgruppe would move north towards Fünfkirchen (Pécs) and Kaposvár. The railway troops had to cross the Drava river at Esseg (in the sector of Kampfgruppe Streckenbach) and rejoin the Kampfgruppe at Fünfkirchen. While elements of the Kampfgruppe would thrust on northwards towards Stuhlweissenburg (Székesfehérvar), part of the Kampfgruppe would engage in securing the important railway centre and the industrial area of Fünfkirchen.

**Kampfgruppe Zwade**, commanded by Generalmajor Zwade, commander of the 367. Inf.Div., comprised:

367. Inf.Div.
elements of the 18. SS-Pz.Gren.Div.
Brüko (mot) B 815

This Kampfgruppe had to cross the Drava river near Varazdin, Yugoslavia, then move east towards Stuhlweissenburg on both sides of Lake Balaton. Their mission was the oilfields at Lispe and the large industrial areas near Aika and Urkut on the north bank of the lake.

## THE NORTH-WESTERN PRONG: LVIII. RES. PZ.KORPS

LVIII. Res. Pz.Korps was in charge of the invasion of Hungary from Austria in the west. For Operation Margarethe General Krüger had been subordinated together with the following units which he had gathered in the Vienna area:

Pz. Lehr-Div.
16. SS-Pz.Gren.Div. Reichsführer-SS
Panther battalion of the 5. SS-Pz.Div. Wiking
s.Art.Abt. 997
Bau-Pi.Btl. 789
Ldsch.Btl. 503
Brüko (mot) B 853

These troops had been organised into two Kampfgruppe, based on each of the divisions allocated to the korps:

**Pz.Lehr-Div.**, commanded by Generalleutnant Bayerlein, would launch a spearhead composed of the reinforced reconnaissance battalion under the command of Hauptmann von Fallois. That unit with the bulk of the division following it, would cross the border at Bruck, to the south-east of Vienna, and move east, through Raab (Györ) and Komarno, towards Budapest. On the way the industrial areas west and south-west of Budapest had to be taken.

**16. SS-Pz.Gren.Div.** Under the command of SS-Brigadeführer Simon, the division would cross the border south of Vienna and split into two on reaching Sopron. The main group, led by a panzergrenadier battalion

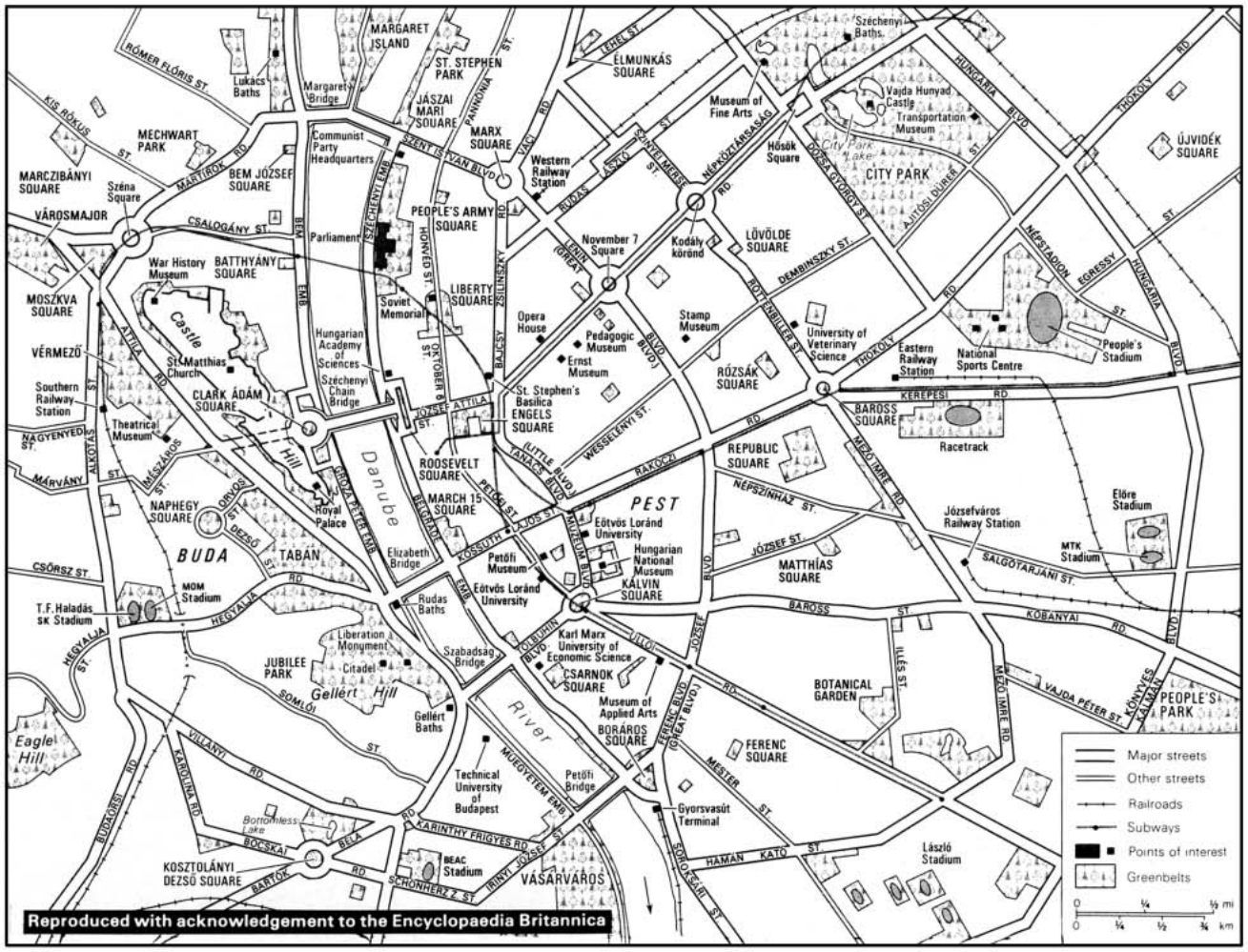
*Left:* **A mixed bag of transport — horse-drawn, civil and military — on Berlin Square! The Steyr 1500A has crossed the bridge and is about to turn down Erzsébet körut. (ECP Armées)** *Above:* **Elizabeth Street has now become Lenin Boulevard and Berlin tér changed to Marx Square.**

Erzsébet körut: an SdKfz 251 is passed by Kettenkrad SdKfz 2s followed by Kubelwagen Kfz 1s. (ECP Armées)

Kommandopanzerwagen SdKfz 151/6 displaying a tactical sign — probably staff of LVIII. Res. Pz.Korps. (ECP Armées)

*Above:* SdKfz 251 with Zugkraftwagen 8t mounting 2cm Flakvierling 38 with trailer. (ECP Armées) *Below:* Same spot, different era.

*Above:* **Having reached the bottom of Erzsébet körut, the 16. SS panzergrenadiers turn left before an informal saluting base by the corner of Rakoczi ut. (ECP Armées)** *Below:* **Emke, on the left, is still a famous Budapest restaurant on Lenin körut.**



**The old and the new on Rakoczi Road — a single-decker replaces the SdKfz 10 (7.5cm le IG 18 in tow) of thirty-eight years ago.**

*Above:* **The clock indicates 11.05 a.m. One group drives straight on into Josef körut — a Steyr 1500A truck at a corner of a junction considerably transformed. (ECP Armées)**

under the command of Sturmbannführer Cantow, would travel along the road through Sarvar and Veszprem toward Stuhlweissenburg and Budapest, securing on the way the industrial area of the Bakony, while a secondary group went via Papa to take the industries near Tata and Banhida.

**THE NORTHERN PRONG:**
**LXXVIII. ARMEEKORPS Z.B.V.**

LXXVIII. Armeekorps z.b.V. was in charge of the invasion on the northern border of Hungary from Czechoslovakia. As the Slovakian government had not been informed about Operation Margarethe, the units of this korps could not start at 4.00 a.m. but would have to wait until mid-day in order to preserve the secrecy of the operation. Because they had to cross Slovakia before reaching the Hungarian border, their start would be delayed until the afternoon of the first day. The korps comprised the following units:

Verst.Gren.Rgt. 1029 Grossdeutschland
Verst.Gren.Rgt. 1030 Feldherrnhalle
Alarm-Rgt. of the Division Brandenburg
Bau-Pi.Btl. 799
Ldsch.Btl. 837
Brüko (mot) B 2/412

These units had to move south across Slovakia and through Rosenau (Roznava) and Kaschau (Kosice) before reaching the area of Miskolc where they had to secure the industrial area. Parties would be sent to secure the Tisza bridges between the Czechoslovakian border south to the Szolnok area where contact had to be made with the neighbouring units of Kampfgruppe Hildebrandt. The bulk of the korps would occupy the sector east of Budapest in order to stop any movement in the direction of eastern Hungary which was not to be occupied.

**RESERVE UNITS**

These reserves had been allocated to Margarethe by Ob. Südost:

**100. Jg.Div.,** minus one of its battalions, was positioned in Serbia and Croatia along the railway line between Belgrade and Vinkovci. From there the unit would be called in if necessary to secure the eastern flank against a possible threat from unoccupied eastern Hungary or in the Budapest area.

**Pi.Rgt.Stab (mot) 679** positioned near Belgrade and Vinkovci, together with three bridging columns, was held ready to back up any of the Kampfgruppe if they had difficulty in the crossing of the Tisza or Drava rivers during the first critical hours of the operation.

**An armoured car with the essential bucket crosses Kalvin ter — this square remains almost unchanged. (ECP Armées)**

# THE OPERATION AND ITS AFTERMATH

*Above:* **The German take-over is completed. Major Prinz Schönburg, commander of II Abteilung of Panzer Lehr Regiment 130, on the bank of the Danube with Oberleutnant Meyer and Leutnant Finsterwalder. The Burgberg is in the background. (Helmut Ritgen)** *Below:* **Author Jean Paul Pallud overlooks Castle Hill today.**

Operation Margarethe went as smoothly as planned and the situation in the Hungarian capital by midday on March 19 is indicated in the following report of a conversation between Generalleutnant Foertsch and Major i. G. Beck of the LVIII. Res. Pz.Korps staff:

'General Foertsch complains that no report from the korps has yet arrived. From a Luftwaffe report, the Aukl.Abt. of Pz.Lehrdivision reached Komaron by 7.30 a.m. Action Pfuhlstein [Trojan Horse] is going according to plan. Pfuhlstein with the bulk of his troops is surrounding Budapest with an honour guard inside the city. General Foertsch reiterates that the town must not be entered. He explains the political situation: Horthy will arrive by midday to form a new government. German forces have to be assembled all around Budapest and threaten the city, ready to enter it from all directions if necessary, but only after a formal order has been given by the Heeresgruppe. Pfuhlstein has orders to wait for us on his road of advance. Heeresgruppe intends to move to Budapest on March 20.'

Meanwhile Horthy had had several hours for Hitler's ultimatum to sink in yet, by the time his train reached Budapest, the Regent's attitude had hardened. Nevertheless, with a welcome home committee of German troops to greet him when he arrived back in his capital, Horthy had no option but to bow to German pressure and install a collaborationist government under Döme Sztójay, Hungarian Minister in Berlin. By March 25 the roads to the city had been sealed by units of LVIII. Res.Pz.Korps and the next day elements of the Pz.Lehrdivision and 16. SS-Pz.Gren.Div. moved into Budapest in a show of strength.

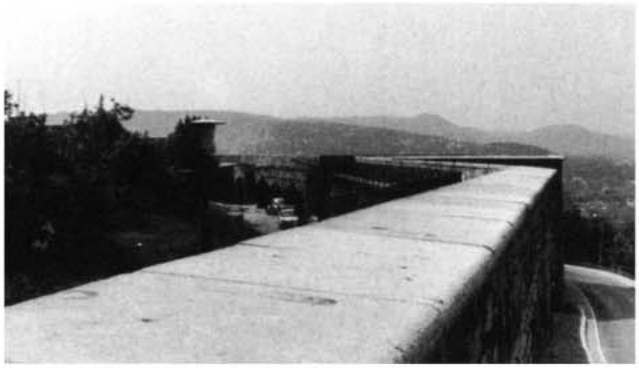
The impositions of the new government carried all the usual hallmarks of the Nazi dictatorship: political parties, trades unions, and the Press were all repressed, and the Jews, who until then had been more or less left unharmed in Hungary, began to receive harsh treatment. General mobilisation was proclaimed to provide additional forces to bolster the German cause in the East and by the end of the summer the Hungarian army comprised twelve divisions.

Although the Allied air forces had by and large left Hungary alone, this re-alignment of the government caused the country to become a legitimate target after March 1944 and Budapest, as well as other towns, began to suffer from aerial bombardment.

Germany's problems in the East were not helped by the shaky allegiance of Romania and the declared neutrality of Bulgaria. With the Soviet offensive in the summer of 1944, the former changed sides declaring war on Germany on August 25 and the latter, with Russian troops already on its soil, did likewise on September 8. Both countries entered the battle alongside the advancing Soviet army which during September was pushing into Hungary towards Budapest. Following the capture of Arad on the 21st, the German military plenipotentiary in Budapest reported that the Hungarian High Council had completely lost its nerve.

Hitler had already received disturbing reports on the internal situation in Hungary (Döme Sztójay was replaced by Géza Lakatos on August 29) and a meeting with the chief of the Hungarian General Staff, General Voros Janos, on September 12, did nothing to allay his suspicions. (Peace feelers had in fact already been put out to the Allies by Admiral Horthy.) Ever-distrustful of his so-called ally, Hitler summoned to the Wolfschanze at Rastenburg someone whose loyalty he could count on and the man whose daring had already been proved a year before in the mountains of Italy — Otto Skorzeny.

**One result of Operation Margarethe was the addition of Hungary to the Allied list of strategic bombing targets.** *Above:* **Here Hungarian soldiers observe the blasting of Ferencvaros — a south-eastern suburb of Budapest. (ECP Armées)** *Below:* **Taken from the high ground of Gellért Hill in Buda, part of the former Citadel is now a tourist hotel, restaurant and museum.**



German AA guns augmented the Hungarian defences. Here a German SdKfz 7/2 mounting a 3.7cm Flak 36 supplements a Hungarian 40mm Bofors on the Citadel itself. (ECP Armées)

Eighth Air Force crew members guarded by Hungarian troops. Do any of our American readers recognise them? (ECP Armées)

**'My driver and another man, both Luftwaffe personnel, were taking the air on a seat in the little garden . . . I was standing by my car pretending to be fiddling with the engine.'JPP stands, or rather sits, in for the Luftwaffe and an unknown Hungarian unwittingly takes on the rôle of Skorzeny. This is Marcius 15 ter — March 15 Square — on the map on page 7.**

# OPERATION PANZERFAUST

When Skorzeny reached Hitler's East Prussian headquarters on September 10, he was ordered to attend some important conferences on the situation in the south-eastern theatre as an important assignment was under consideration for him in that area. The overall position was crystal clear: if Hungary, Germany's last ally, should go under, seventy divisions — more than a million men — would go with her and the war would be irretrievably lost. Hitler told Skorzeny that he was aware of Horthy's secret overtures to both the West and the Russians: 'You' Skorzeny later wrote in his autobiography, 'must be prepared to seize the Citadel of Budapest by force if he betrays his alliance with us'.

Hitler explained that General Kleemann was in Hungary at that moment putting together a new IV. Pz.Korps, from what remained of the IV. Armeekorps decimated in the Soviet offensive, for the defence of Budapest. He said that while Skorzeny would be subordinate to General Kleeman, he [Skorzeny] would be given carte blanche for whatever assistance he needed for the task.

With the written orders signed by Hitler in his pocket, requiring all political and military authorities everywhere to give Skorzeny all the assistance he needed, he travelled to Budapest. There, under the guise of 'Doktor Wolff' he lived, together with his aides, for three weeks in the luxurious flat of a pro-German Hungarian, seeking out the lie of the land.

The first problem they had to deal with was Admiral Horthy's younger son Nicklas whom they dubbed 'Mickey Mouse' after his nickname 'Nicky'. (His elder son, Stefan, had been named Vice-Regent but had been killed in an aircraft crash in August 1942.) Now Nicklas was implicated in the Hungarian peace negotiations with the Soviet Union being conducted through Yugoslav emmissaries loyal to Tito. The German intelligence service had managed to infiltrate one of its Croation agents into the negotiations and thus Obergruppenführer Winckelmann, head of German security forces in Hungary, knew every development. On October 10 both Horthys, father and son, were spotted attending one meeting and Winckelman was determined to arrest Nicklas before the next meeting arranged for five days hence. Skorzeny was asked to cover the arrest with his men in case the Hungarian army intervened.

At 10.00 a.m. on October 15, Nicklas arrived at the rendezvous — the office of Felix Bornemisza (director of the Danube Steamship Company) in a building on Galamb ut (now Eskü Ter) near the Erzsébet Bridge. Skorzeny takes up the story:

'October 15 was a bright Sunday. The streets were empty at the time appointed for the rendezvous. My company was in a side street in covered trucks. Hauptmann von Fölkersam [his aide] kept me in touch with them, as obviously I could not show myself in uniform that day. If I was to appear on the stage, so to speak, I must be inconspicuous. My driver and another man, both Luftwaffe personnel, were taking the air on a seat in the little garden which occupied most of the square. I drove up in my own car shortly before the meeting began. When I entered the square, I noticed a Hungarian military lorry and a private car, which was presumably Horthy's, stationed in front of the building of which we had been told. It took me no time to make up my mind and park my own car right in the path of these vehicles, so that they could not get away in a hurry.

'The floor above the offices in this building had been occupied the day before by policemen, who had taken lodgings nearby. Others were to enter it from the street about 10.10 a.m., and make the arrests.

'Three Honved [Hungarian army] officers were sitting in the covered lorry, but could not be seen from the street. Two others were lounging on benches in the gardens. I was standing by my car, pretending to be fiddling with the engine, when the curtain rose on the drama.

'The first German policeman had hardly entered the building when there was a burst of machine-pistol fire from the lorry, and the second fell to the ground with a wound in the stomach. The two other Hungarian officers came running out of the gardens, firing their revolvers. I had just time to take cover behind my car when its open door was drilled. Things were getting really hot! Honved soldiers appeared at the windows and on the balconies of houses. The moment the first shots rang out, my driver and his companion rushed up to me, assuming that I had been hit. The driver was shot through the thigh, but could still walk. I gave the agreed signal to my detachment, and we three defended ourselves with our weapons as best we could against the rain of fire from the enemy. It was a most uncomfortable situation, though it only lasted a few minutes.

'By then my car was not much more than a

**'We hurled a number of grenades in the doorway, thereby bringing down the door and some marble slabs which temporarily blocked the entrance.'**

sieve. Bullets ricocheting from walls passed unpleasantly near and we could only put our noses out of cover for long enough to have pot shots at the enemy and keep them at least 10 to 15 metres away.

'Then I heard my men running out of the side street in our direction. Fölkersam had taken the situation in at a glance and posted the first section at the corner of the square, while the others swept through the gardens and began firing at the house-fronts. My first assailants now withdrew to the shelter of a nearby house, which was occupied by Hungarians in some strength. I observed that these men were lining up for an assault and quick thinking inspired us to hurl a number of grenades in the doorway, thereby bringing down the door and some marble slabs, which temporarily blocked the entrance.

'With that the fighting ceased. It may have lasted five minutes.

'Our policemen now came down from the upper floor, bringing four prisoners with them. The two Hungarians, "Micky Mouse" and his comrade Bornemisza, were bundled into one of our trucks. To conceal their identity, our fellows had tried to roll them up in carpets, with only partial success, I observed, noting the effort required to get the refractory prisoners into the vehicle.

'The lorry moved off and my company withdrew. I was anxious to avoid further scuffles, which were only too likely when the enemy recovered from his surprise. Fortunately, our retirement passed without further incident.

'Some instinct prompted me to follow the truck. Another car and driver were available for me. Barely a hundred metres from the square, under the Erzsébet bridge, I saw three Honved companies approaching at the double. If they got any nearer, they could easily find themselves involved in a mix-up with my men — an eventuality I was determined to prevent at all costs. Time must be gained somehow, but bluff was my only resource. I told my driver to pull up, and ran towards the officer who appeared to be in command. "Halt your men quick!" I yelled. "There's a hell of a mix-up going on up there! No one knows what's happening! You'd better find out for yourself first!"

'The trick came off. The troops halted and the officer seemed undecided what to do. It was lucky for me that he knew some German, as otherwise he might not have understood me. The short pause was vital from my point of view. By now, my own men must have got away in their trucks. "I must get on!" I called to the Hungarian officer, jumped into my car and made for the aerodrome. When I arrived, the two Hungarians were in a plane, and two minutes later they were on their way to Vienna.'

Meanwhile preparations for the operation against the Hungarian government had been completed and plans had been laid so that all the German troops in and around the city would be ready for action at any moment. However the menace from advancing Soviet troops was so grave that on October 10 the IV. Pz.Korps was ordered east towards the Debrecen battles; with it the Pz.Gren.Div. Feldherrnhalle also moved away from Budapest, thus weakening the German strength at hand for the projected coup. On October 11, Himmler sent a telex to Heeresgruppe Süd announcing that Obergruppenführer von dem Bach-Zelewski would be the successor in Budapest for General Kleemann who had moved east at the head of his korps. Von dem Bach-Zelewski, who was fresh from putting down the rising of the Polish Underground in Warsaw, immediately advised strong measures against the wavering Hungarians such as blasting the Burgberg, the seat of government, to rubble with the huge 65cm mortars of Karl Batterie 428 at his disposal. However, General Wenck, then chief of the Führungsgruppe (command group) in OKH, sent to Budapest with orders to take command if necessary, rejected such violence and Sturmbannführer Skorzeny was soon ordered to carry out Operation Panzerfaust — his 'coup de main' against the Burgberg.

The Burgberg, some three kilometres long and 600 metres wide on a hill overlooking the Danube river, was the actual centre of political life in Hungary. At about midday on October 15 the Burgberg was occupied by Honved troops and the gates and roads were closed to traffic, thus isolating several German organisations, amongst them the embassy, that were located there. At 1.00 p.m. Hungarian radio broadcast an announcement by Admiral Horthy in which he made public his intention of bringing about an armistice with the Soviets. As he was acting on his own behalf and had not consulted his Parliament, the Lakatos government resigned on the grounds that it could not approve an armistice.

Nevertheless, it was the excuse for which the Germans were waiting and without further ado orders to put Operation Panzerfaust into being were issued. During the afternoon German troops occupied the railway station and other important buildings and men of the 22. SS-Freiw.-Kavallerie-Div. Maria Theresia were stationed all around the Burgberg. Skorzeny and von Fölkersam fixed 6.00 a.m. the following morning as H-Hour for the assault.

'I projected a concentric assault, which should yet have a focal point in the centre,' wrote Skorzeny after the war, 'which I intended to be a detachment approaching from Vienna Street. The factor of surprise would be of greatest effect at that point. I hoped to rush the Vienna gate with little resistance and without too much noise, and suddenly emerge

**The Vienna Gate (now Bécse kapu) formed, as it does still, the northern entrance to the walled Burgberg on Castle Hill. Skorzeny entered here at 6.00 a.m. on October 16, 1944 to capture the seat of government.**

**Inside to the right lies Kapisztran tér — this shot of one of the Tiger IIs was taken after the coup was over. (Bundesarchiv)**

**Tiger II 233 on the approach route through Kapisztran Square. Another 'after action' shot of tank and crewmen from schwere Panzer Abteilung 503. (Bundesarchiv)**

in the square facing the Citadel. A rapid decision should follow automatically. If we could quickly force our way into the presumed centre of the Hungarian resistance, the action would soon be over, with a minimum of casualties on both sides.'

Together with detachments from his own special units, SS-Jagdverbande Mitte and SS-Fallschirmjägerbatallion 600, Skorzeny had at his disposal various units then near Budapest or discreetly brought up for the action. By midnight on October 15 these troops had been positioned behind the cordon drawn around the Burgberg by elements of the 22. SS-Freiw.-Kavallerie-Div. during the afternoon. South of the Burgberg, a battalion formed from officer cadets of the Kriegsakademie at Wiener-Neustadt was to get into the gardens of the Palais after having blown open an access through the iron gates and then keep the Hungarian troops positioned there pinned down. Then to the south-west, the bulk of SS-Jagdverbande Mitte, under the command of Haupsturmführer Fucker, had to surmount the fortifications and approach the Hungarian troops defending the southern access of the castle from the rear. On the east, where the Burgberg overlooked the Danube river, a company of SS-Fallschirmjägerbatallion 600 had to capture an underground passage leading from the bank of the river up to the war ministry while on the northern side, the main detachment would cross the Weiner Tor (now Bécsi kapu) and drive up the Burgberg along two parallel roads until reaching Szent György tér and the Palais. That detachment was composed of a company from SS-Jagdverbande Mitte backed by some Tiger IIs from s.Pz.Abt. 503 and a platoon of engineers from Stu.Pi.Btl. 500 manning some Goliath remote-controlled demolition vehicles. The assault had to be conducted without any noise and Skorzeny issued instructions that casual shots were to be ignored.

At 3.00 a.m. on October 16 Skorzeny ordered all the officers to his command post near the Blutfeld (now Vérmezö) to make any last-minute adjustments, and at 5.59 a.m. the column started out with Skorzeny in the leading vehicle followed by four Tiger IIs, then the Goliaths followed by the trucks carrying the grenadiers of SS-Jagdverbande Mitte. Skorzeny describes the action in his own words:

'Just before 5.30 a.m., when it was beginning to get light, I took my place in my truck at the head of the column. Behind me, I had two [sic] Tigers, followed by a platoon of the Goliath company, and the rest of the unit in their trucks. Automatics were set at safety. Most of the men had slumped in their seats and were enjoying a quiet nap. They had the hardened warriors' gift of snatching a bit of sleep when a really tough job lay ahead.

'I took the precaution of sending my second-in-command to Corps Headquarters, to ascertain whether there had been any change in the situation, but the answer was in the negative, so zero-hour was adhered to.

'In my truck I had Fölkersam and Ostafel, as well as five NCOs who had been in the Gran Sasso show (*see After the Battle No. 22*). I considered them my personal assault group. Each was armed with a machine-pistol, a few hand-grenades, and the new panzerfaust. We were wondering what the Hungarian tanks in the Citadel would do. If necessary our tanks and panzerfausts would have to look after them.

'At one minute before 6 o'clock, I waved my arm as the signal to switch on. Then I stood up in my truck and pointed upwards several times, whereupon we started off, rather slowly, as it was uphill. I could only hope that none of our vehicles struck a mine, which would have blocked our advance and upset our plan. The Vienna Gate emerged out of the half-light — the way was open! A few Hungarian soldiers stared curiously at us. We

*Left:* **Szent György utca leads to the square outside the Royal Palace — the Valpalota. This is Tiger 214 covering entry into the street. (Bundesarchiv)** *Right:* **Much at this end of the Burgberg was razed to the ground in the subsequent battle for Budapest.**

were soon at the top. "Gradually accelerate," I whispered to my driver.

'On our right was a Honved barracks. "Nasty if we get fired on from the flank," murmured Fölkersam at my side. There were two machine guns behind sandbags in front of the barracks, but nothing happened. No sound could be heard but the rumble of the Tigers behind.

'I chose the side street on the right in which the German Embassy was situated. We could now travel at a good pace without losing the rest of the column. The tanks were doing a good 35 to 40 kilometres to the hour, and at length the Citadel was not more than a thousand metres away and a substantial part of our task had been accomplished.

'Now the great detached mass of the War Ministry appeared to the left, and we heard the distant sound of two heavy explosions. Our men must have forced their way through the tunnel. The critical moment was at hand. We were past the War Ministry and in the square in a flash. Three Hungarian tanks faced us, but as we drew level the leading one tilted its gun skywards as a signal that they would not fire.

'A barricade of stones had been placed in front of the gate of the Citadel. I told my driver to draw aside and signalled to the leading Tiger to charge it. We left our truck and ran behind, while the barricade collapsed under the weight of the 30-ton monster, which continued its irresistible thrust. Levelling its long gun barrel at the centre of the courtyard, it found itself faced with a battery of six anti-tank guns.

'We leapt over the debris of the barricade and burst through the shattered gate. A colonel of the guard got out his revolver to stop us, but Fölkersam knocked it out of his hand. On our right was what appeared to be the main entrance, and we took it at the run, almost colliding with a Honved officer, whom I ordered to lead us straight to the Commandant. He immediately complied, and at his side we rushed up the broad staircase, not failing to notice the elegant red carpet.

'On reaching the first floor we turned left into a corridor, and I left one of my men behind to cover us. The officer pointed to a door and we went into a small ante-room where a table had been drawn up to the open window and a man was lying on it firing a machine gun into the courtyard. Holzer, a short, stocky NCO, clasped the gun in his arms and flung it out of the window. The gunner was so surprised that he fell off the table.

'I saw a door on my right, knocked and walked straight in. A Honved major-general got up and came towards me. "Are you the Commandant?" I asked. "You must surrender the Citadel at once! If you don't, you will be responsible for any bloodshed. You

*Above:* **Looking north-west across the square — pock-marked government buildings behind Tiger 234. (Bundesarchiv)** *Below:* **Everything was ruined during the battle for the city in 1945 and subsequently demolished.**

**Tiger 200 with the bulky silhouette of Skorzeny on the right of the turret smashes through a barricade after leaving the inner yard of the Palace.**

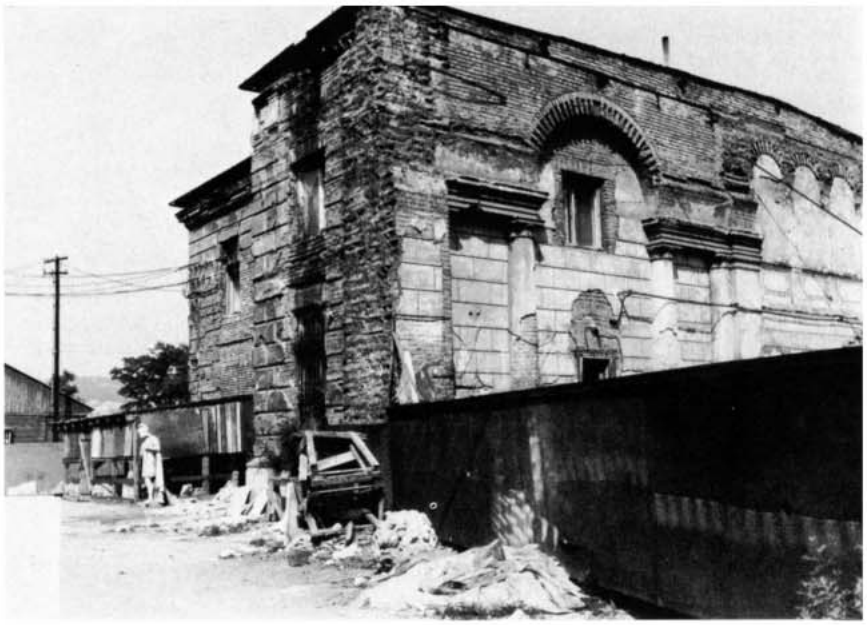
must decide immediately!" As we could hear shots outside, including bursts of machine gun fire, I added: "You can see that any resistance is hopeless. I have already occupied the Citadel." I was speaking the truth, as I was quite certain that the Mitte battalion, led by the redoubtable Leutnant Hunke, was just behind me and must have seized all the strategic points.

'The Hungarian major-general was not long in making up his mind: "I surrender the Citadel and will order the cease-fire at once." We shook hands and soon arranged that a Hungarian officer and one of ours should inform the troops fighting in the Citadel gardens of the cease-fire. After ten minutes had passed, no noise of battle could be heard.

'Accompanied, at my request, by two Hungarian majors to serve as interpeters, I went along the corridor to have a look round. We came to the rooms adjoining the Regent's reception room. I was astonished to find that he was not there and learned that he had left shortly before six o'clock. It transpired later that he had been escorted by Obergruppenführer Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, commander of IX. SS-Geb.Korps, to the latter's residence on the Citadel hill. His family had previously taken refuge with the Papal Nuncio. The presence of Horthy would have made no difference to our plans, which were not concerned with him personally, but confined to controlling the seat of government.

'While we were looking out of the window over the so-called "Blutfeld", a few bullets whistled past. Hunke subsequently explained that it had proved impossible to notify the cease-fire to some of the Hungarian posts on the Danube side of the Citadel gardens. Two rounds from a panzerfaust soon convinced them that it would be wiser to abandon resistance.

'The whole operation had not taken more than half an hour. Peace returned to the city and the citizens in the vicinity could turn over



*Centre:* **Szent György Square. Otto Skorzeny, Adrian von Fölkersam and Walter Girg. (Bundesarchiv)** *Right:* **Only part of the corner of the Palace remains standing (behind Skorzeny's right shoulder). Fences crossing the site restrict access and viewpoints for photography today.**

Panzerfaust is over and the troops relax in the castle grounds. These Gebirgsjäger are most probably officer cadets from the Kriegsakademie at Weiner-Neustadt. (Bundesarchiv)

These SS-grenadiers stand in the garden beneath the terrace on the right in the pictures above. (Bundesarchiv)

Appropriately armed with two different Panzerfaust, men of 22. SS-Freiwillige-Kavallerie-Division 'Maria Theresia' with discarded Hungarian equipment. (Bundesarchiv)

More armaments: Panzerschreck, MG 30s and a Solothurn 18-1100 anti-tank rifle, piles of stick grenades and bolt action rifles. (Bundesarchiv)

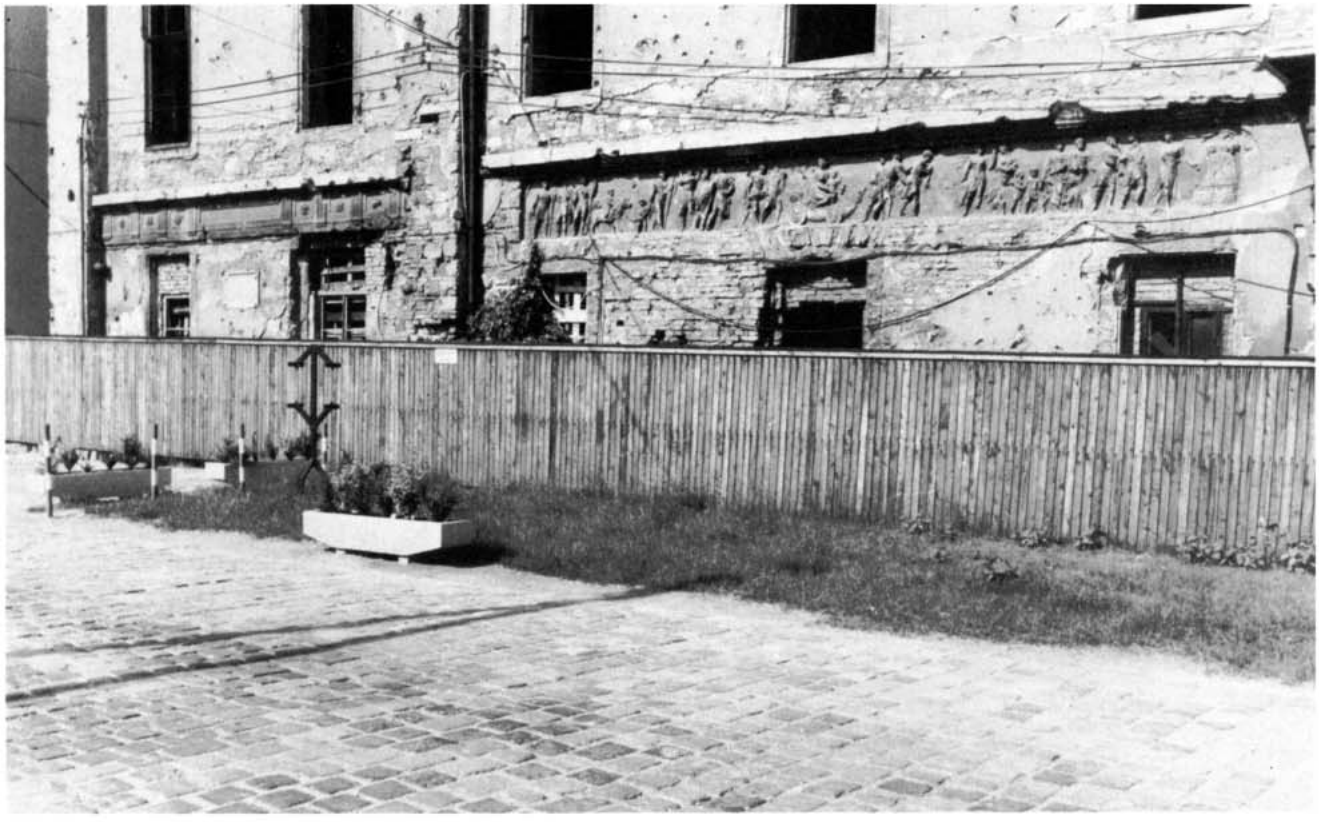
Two casualties, most probably German, lie in the outer yard of the Palace. (Bundesarchiv)

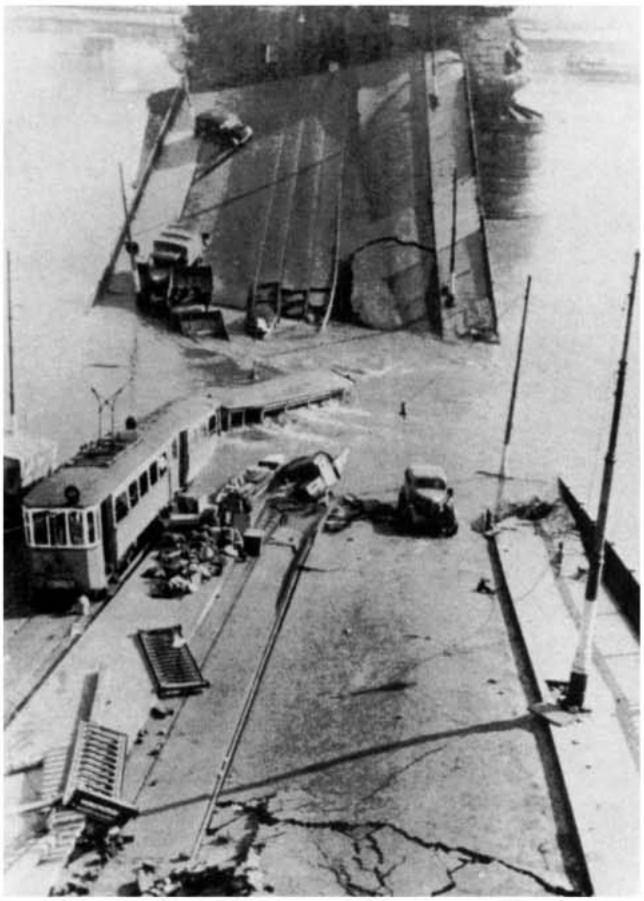
The arrow-cross 'Pfeilkreutzler' armbands identify armed Honved, here operating under German control. (Bundesarchiv)

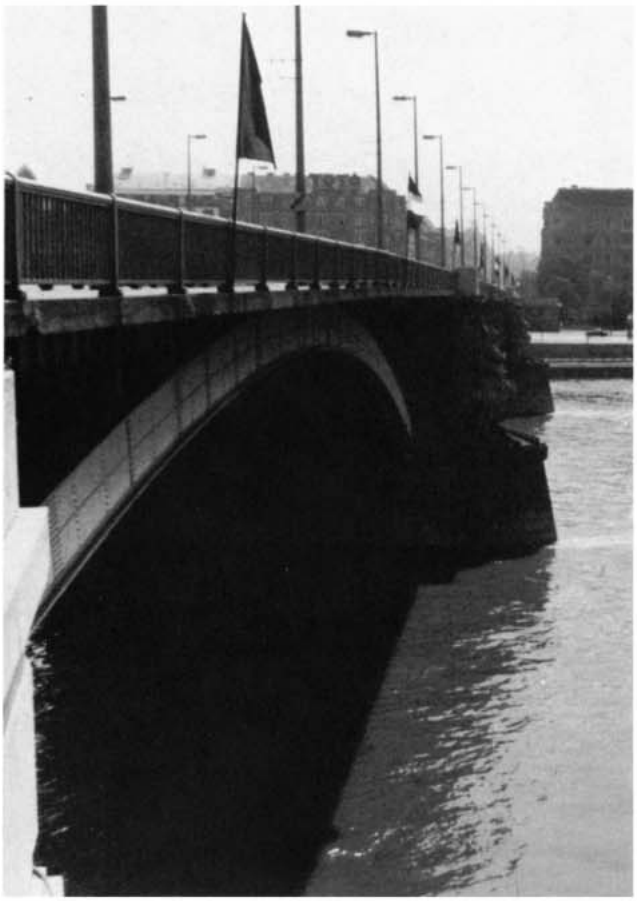
**Szent György Square looking east — remaining buildings help to pinpoint the spot where Vezérezredes Beregly Karoly (with moustache), the new Minister of War and Honved Chief of Staff, and Ferenc Szalasi, the new ruler after the Skorzeny coup, once stood. Szalasi was executed after the war as a traitor. (Bundesarchiv)**

and go to sleep again. I rang up Corps Headquarters on a special line and could almost hear the sigh of relief at the other end. Apparently they had considered the success of my coup as somewhat problematic.

'Shortly afterwards, the reports came in from the War Ministry (where alone, there had been a short, sharp action), and the Ministry for Home Affairs, and one by one the commanders of the different groups turned up to relate their experiences. Our casualties had been agreeably low, not more than four killed and about twelve wounded. The only serious fighting had been in the gardens. I asked the Commandant about the Hungarian casualties and was told that they amounted to three killed and fifteen wounded.'







**Within a matter of days, the German troops in Budapest were threatened by Soviet forces. Demolition plans were laid which included the blowing of the Danube bridges. At the beginning of November 1944, with battles going on in the suburbs, German engineers unintentionally set off the charges under the Margit bridge — the very one over which they had entered Budapest seven months before. Several cars, lorries and even a tram were on the bridge when the accident happened. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)**

Although successfully accomplished, the coup d'état brought the Germans only a brief respite. It did nothing for the dubious allegiance of the mass of Hungarian troops, many of whom deserted to the advancing Russians. By the end of 1944, Budapest was encirled by Soviet troops and the 800,000 civilians were under siege conditions, while the city was pounded by artillery. Although the Germans tried to keep the city supplied by air, and made an effort to break through on the ground, they were vain attempts. Wavering Hungarian troops were hardly the best allies and by February 12 it was all over. Less than 2,000 Germans and Hungarians managed to break out and reach friendly lines some thirty kilometres to the west.

Budapest was in ruins, 35,000 German and Hungarian troops had been killed and an equal number made prisoner. An estimated 60,000 civilians had lost their lives inside the city alone, and, altogether, its alliance with Germany cost Hungary more than 136,000 soldiers killed. However the ultimate irony came long after the fighting had ceased when, on February 10, 1947, the country was once again reduced to its 1920 frontiers by the Treaty of Paris.

**A Hummel self-propelled 15cm howitzer being towed by a Zugkraftwagen 18t south on Tanacs körut. (Bundesarchiv)**

**The battle for Budapest is nearing its end — a Hungarian 40mm and German 88 pointing westwards cover Lövohaz utca. (Ullstein)**

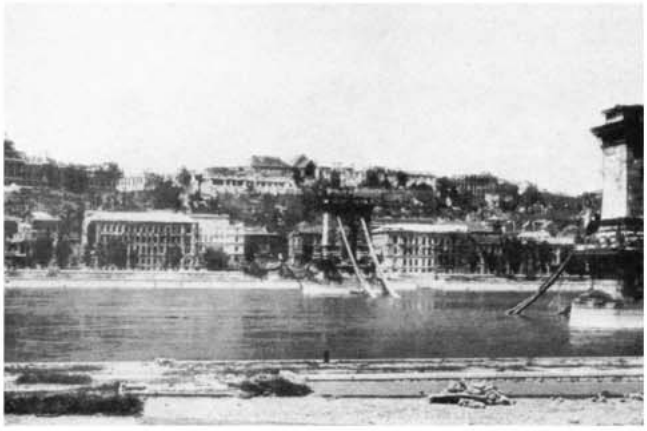
*I started my trip to Hungary with a feeling inherited from the Cold War era. I was expecting to find a grey country, with queues in front of every shop, policemen or even tanks at every crossroads and inquisitive bureaucrats in every office. As the participation of Hungary on the side of Germany against the Soviet Union during WWII is probably an embarrassing recollection to the present Marxist rulers of the country, I chose to travel there as an innocent tourist with the pictures to be matched cut up like puzzle pictures in order to remove every German black cross and SS sign!*

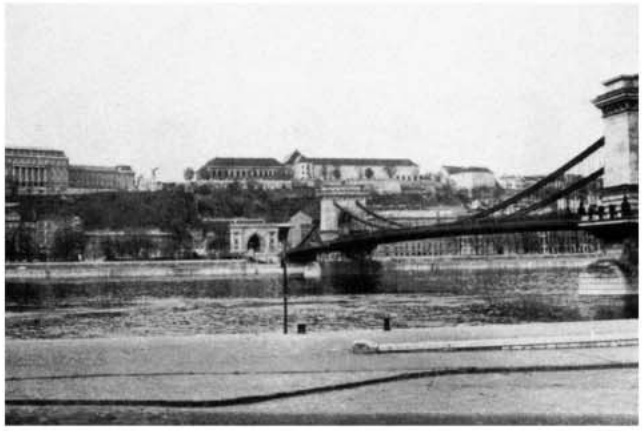
*When my Tu 134 landed at Budapest airport, my first sight seemed to confirm my fears, as a soldier, armed with an assault rifle, was guarding the plane steps. However, I soon calmed down when the customs controls appeared quite simple and uninquisitive, and I discovered that the armed guard was only there against the possibility of hijacking. My worries faded away rapidly the next morning when I found the town streets quite similar to the ones in any large Western city; streets lined with shops, full of customers, and streams of cars at the traffic lights . . .*

*On my first afternoon my concern revived a little when I tried to match some pictures on Margit bridge. There was a policeman standing every ten metres, all of whom looked at me suspiciously when I started to lean over the balustrade to look on the street below. Below stood even more policemen and a few*

*Above:* **German officers visit the Esztergom Cathedral overlooking the Danube probably in the spring of 1944. In the party are Oberst Gerhardt (second from left), commander Panzer Lehr Regiment; next to him Generalleutnant Bayerlein, CG Panzer Lehr Division; then General der Panzertruppen Krüger, CG LVIII Reserve Panzer Korps. The others are staff officers. (ECP Armées)** *Below:* **Our staff officer surveys the same scene looking towards Czechoslovakia in the far distance.**

**Because of the risk of having potentially offensive material confiscated, JP carried out all his comparison photography from tracings — quite an incredible achievement in the circumstances** **(see page 13).**





The last bridge blown when Pest was evacuated was the Szechenyi Lanchid. The fortified hill of Varhegy in the background.

The Castle (Varpalota) seen looking north from Gellért Hill. In the background Margit bridge and the Parliament building in Pest.

The western exit of the tunnel (Alagut) which joins Clark Ádám Square with Attila ut and runs beneath the Varhegy.

February 1945. Regimental Commander Nikolai Lebed of the Soviet Army at the Elisabeth bridge. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)

Russian anti-aircraft battery on Gellért Hill. Pest is on the right, Elizabeth bridge behind. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)

Another view from Gellért Hill with the statue of Bishop Gellért and the ruin of the Chain bridge. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)

Temporarily repaired by Soviet army engineers, 'Liberty Bridge' was the first link across the Danube. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)

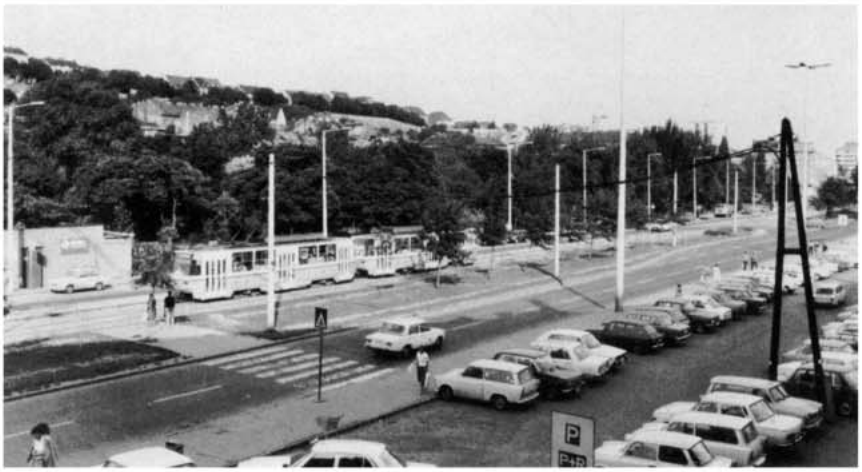
The Chain bridge (Széchenyi lánchid) seen from the fortified Pest embankment. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)

*groups of civilians waving clusters of small flags. Then some fifteen or so big black limousines swept past: Erich Honecker, leader of the Democratic German Republic, was visiting the country and as soon as he had passed the place reverted to normality.*

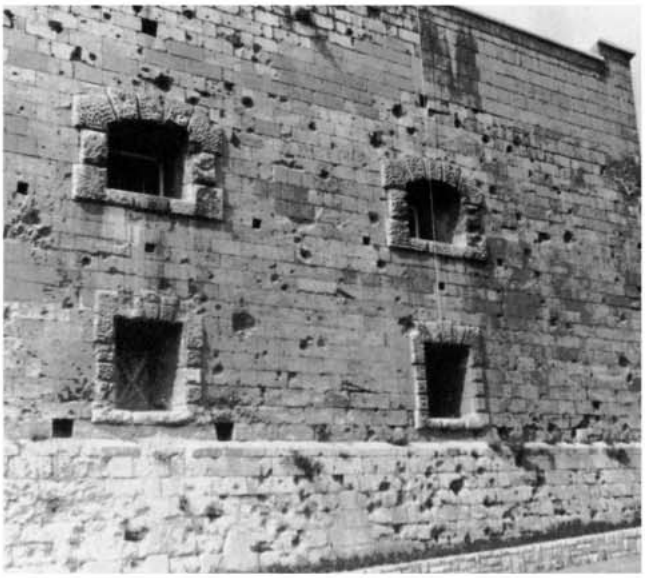
*On my second day in the town I adjusted my impressions a little more about the life there. Although there were a lot of goods in the shops there were still some items commonly available in Western Europe which were missing. Also, although there were lots of cars on the streets, their design reminds one of the 1950s. To a lesser extent in the hotel and in restaurants, but more generally in the shops, I felt a lack of commercial enthusiasm compared with Western sales assistants although this could be because of the language barrier.*

*Nevertheless, Budapest appeared to me as a beautiful town and the Danube, although far from blue, with the six elegant bridges crossing it in the city, gave it an unquestionable charm. On the third day I visited the two hills of Buda: Gellért-hegy with the Citadella and Var-hegy with the castle. Both places suffered severely in 1945 and much battle damage is still visible. The Burgberg, scene of the Skorzeny operation, was very disappointing as the majority of the area has been razed to the ground, probably as a result of the bombardment of the city in 1945, and the comparison photographs taken in this area were a disappointment.*

*Above left:* **JP tried in vain to match this well known photograph which he established had been taken on Krisztina körut. During the re-supply operations, flown mainly by Gruppe I of Luftlandgeschwader 2, between December 28, 1944 and February 12, 1945, the units lost 36 DFS 230 gliders and 12 Gotha Go 242s which landed and could not be retrieved. (Interfoto MTI + Hungary)** *Above:* **A landing strip in the pocket had been established on the Vermezö — then an open park beside the road. By February 9 this had to be abandoned. These Bücker Bü 131s of the Hungarian Army are parked on Krisztina körut beside the park. (Ullstein)**



**Krisztina körut as JP found it — all the houses have been demolished.**



**Battle damage to the Citadel in Buda — graphic examples which still remain to illustrate the struggle for its possession.**

**Budapest war museum. An ex-Austro-Hungarian Skoda 104mm Model 1915 field gun and self-propelled 40mm Nimrod of WWII.**

*The War Museum, set on Var-hegy near Kapisztrán ter, is quite large and well organised with many interesting exhibits, from a Mongolian bow to a panzerfaust, and several AFVs, among them a T-34, are displayed in the yard. It is wise to plan a whole day to visit it properly.*

*On the fourth day I rented a car and started a 1,000 kilometre excursion around the countryside. I visited Szeged, Szekszard, Székesféheryar, Esztergom and took a swim on the way in Lake Balaton where the temperature of the water was 22°C (73°F), not so surprising when you consider that the average depth of the lake is three metres and the maximum depth only twelve. The countryside south of Budapest has a somewhat Mediterranean look: heat, sun, dust and even some storks' nests! On two occasions, lowered barriers at level-crossings enabled me to picture superb oil-burning steam locomotives.*

*Although I had a list of hotels for each of the small towns I visited, I was obliged to stay in the best hotel in the town — the one set aside for foreign tourists — as it was impossible for me even to find the smaller hotel at the address indicated on my list! The hotels in which I stayed were quite good and you could always find someone who could speak at least a few words of English although everyone seemed to speak German. My return to Budapest was not easy as I was trapped on a Sunday evening in traffic jams quite reminiscent of those we have in Western Europe, with the motorway blocked all the way along from Lake Balaton to Budapest.*

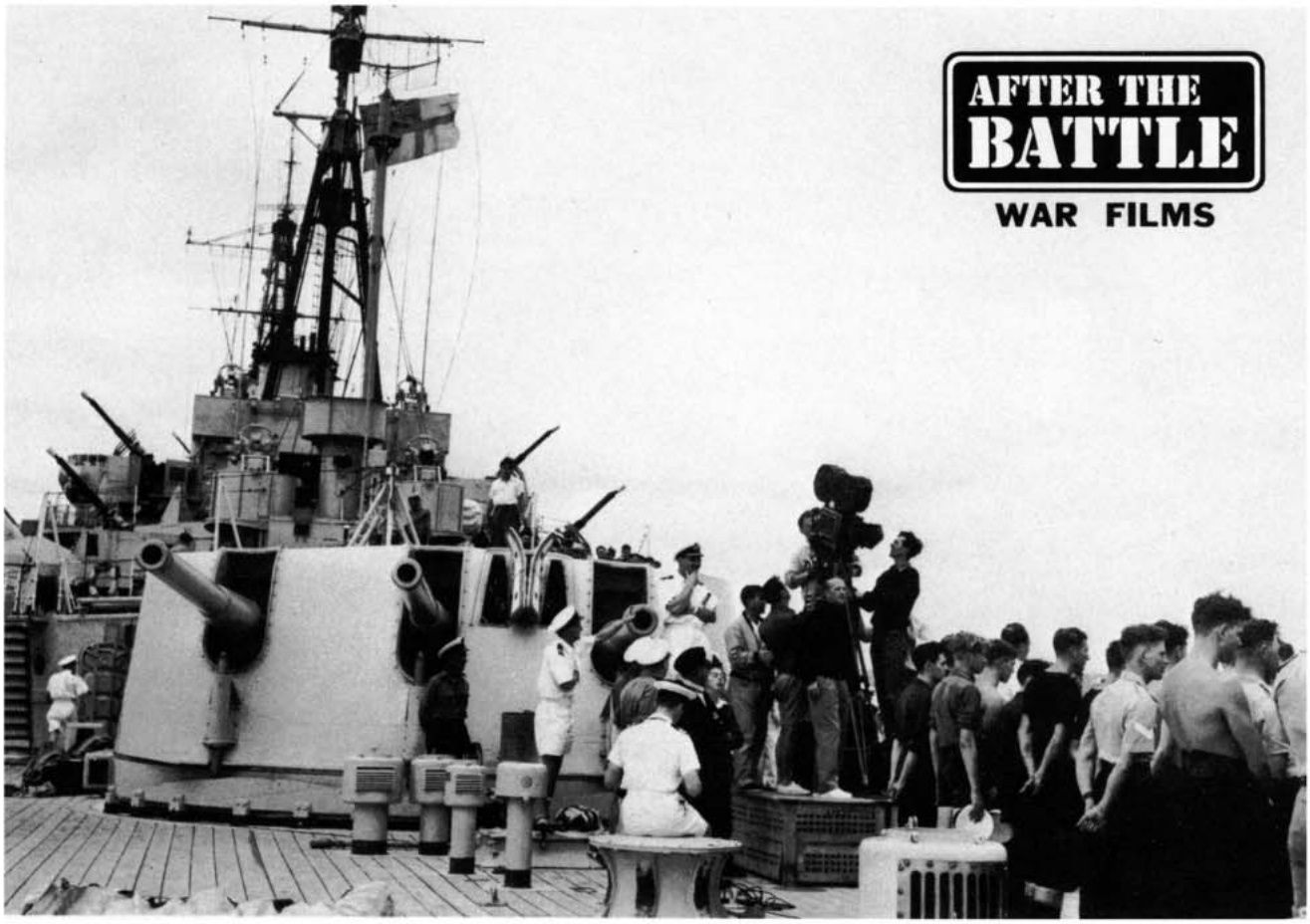
*Life was complicated even more the next morning when I tried to hand back my rented Lada, as a Comecon conference was starting in the Hotel Duna and the whole place had been cordoned off by police. Unfortunately for me, the rental office was inside the perimeter and I was quite unable to explain to the policeman that I had no aggressive intentions at all towards the delegates when I tried to remove the barrier to drive my car inside!*

*On my last day in Budapest I was confronted for the third time with the black market money-changing system. The usual approach is made at first in German, inquiring if you want to change money. The rate offered is double that of the official one, although it is an illegal operation and you may find yourself in jail with a large penalty.*

*When I left Budapest, my last comparison photograph was taken only half an hour before my start for the airport. All in all, I had seen not a single tank, felt very little police presence, and seen few Russian soldiers. I managed to take all the pictures I wanted, of every place except military barracks, and nobody asked me anything about my curiosity. The main difficulty was my self-imposed one of not being able to work from the original photographs in case they were confiscated.*

**Russian memorial at Poldgardi. 'Eternal glory to the heroes of the Red Army who laid down their lives in the struggle against the German Fascist hordes for the freedom and independence of Europe's people.' The monument specifically remembers the soldiers, NCOs and officers of the 3rd Ukranian front.**

JOHANNES BOSCO




# THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

## BY TREVOR POPPLE

The engagement off the east coast of South America between the German 'pocket battleship' the *Admiral Graf Spee* and the two British cruisers *Exeter* and *Ajax* and the New Zealand cruiser *Achilles*, under the command of Commodore Henry Harwood, on December 13, 1939 was the first spectacular combat between the chief protagonists since the war had broken out some three-and-a-half months earlier. Up to that date — and beyond — the state of 'phoney war' prevailed with the opposing armies in Europe facing each other still dug-in, with the respective air forces carrying out mainly reconnaisance missions. Consequently, the news that a heavily armed German warship that had been hunting down and sinking unarmed merchantmen had been damaged in battle and made to run for safety into the port of Montevideo in neutral Uruguay by three smaller and less heavily armed cruisers, ultimately culminating in her self-destruction by scuttling, came as welcome news to the British public and the Cabinet — the latter who were no doubt relieved that with an Empire and vital trade routes to protect the nation still possessed a navy that 'ruled the waves'.

The arrival of the fifties saw the British film industry producing war films that largely extolled Britain's 'finest hours' and, in some instances, 'finest defeats', the latter made palatable by exhibiting the British 'cheerful-in-the-face-of-adversity' syndrome — prevalent at least on celluloid.

The common denominators that linked ninety-nine per cent of British war pictures of this period was the use of monochrome film and the insertion, where necessary, of library footage to enhance — and in some cases create — the battle sequences.

*The Battle of the River Plate*, written, produced and directed by cinema stalwarts Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, released in October 1956, was a worthy exception. Whilst retaining the film style and presentation of the period, it strove to tell the story of the battle and the complex diplomatic events that followed as faithfully and as factually as possible but in rich Technicolor, employing the recently introduced (but in the event short-lived) wide-screen VistaVision. There was not a single frame of library film to be seen.

The conception of the River Plate action as a film came about through circumstance rather than by a flash of creativity. According to Powell it 'was at the suggestion of Emeric. We had an invitation to go to the Mar del Plata [Film] Festival in Argentina and it seemed a pity to go all that distance without a reason. He suggested a film about the *Graf Spee*.'

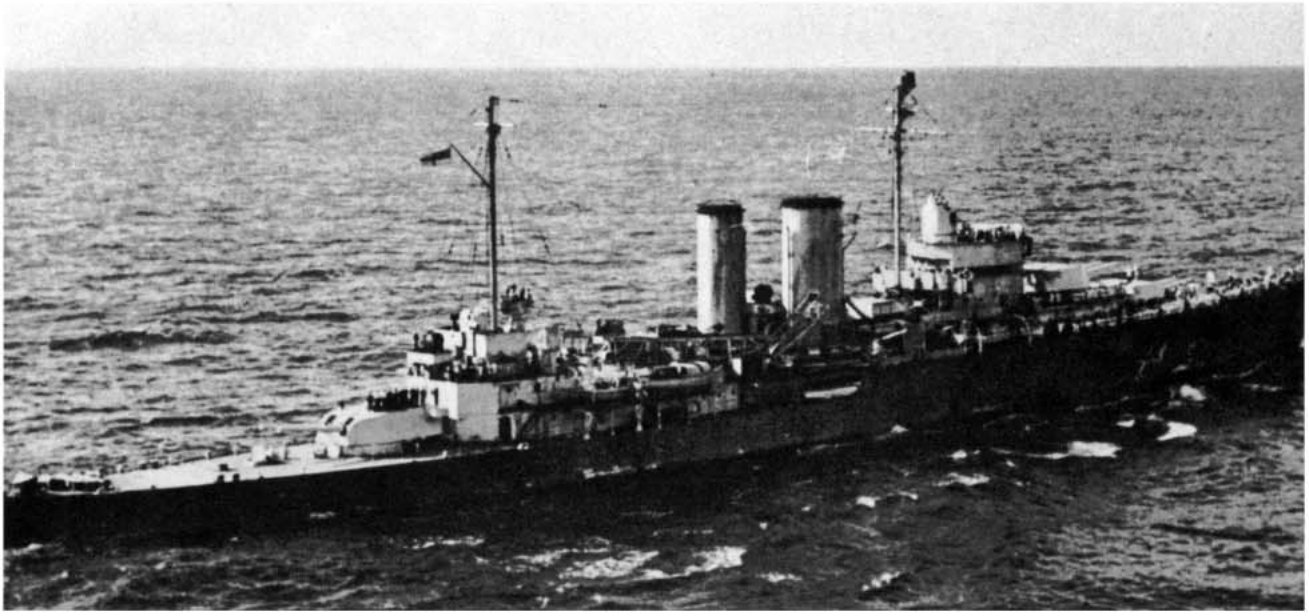
The two producers consulted contemporary accounts, spoke with the Admiralty, and concluded that it was an absolutely fascinating story; so whilst attending the festival they also visited people in Buenos Aires and Montevideo who in varying degrees had been involved in the diplomatic wranglings that had followed the battle. Among them were Dr Guani and General Campos who in 1939 were Uruguay's Foreign Minister and Commander-in-Chief respectively. Later, other key figures were consulted such as Sir Eugen Millington-Drake in Paris who had been the British Minister in Montevideo, and Admiral Sir Henry McCall, the British Naval Attaché in Buenos Aires. Admiral Sir Henry Harwood's widow was interviewed, as were Captain Bell and Admirals Woodhouse and Parry — the three captains from the battle. In addition, Commodore Medley who had been Harwood's staff officer was also consulted.

Before the camera was to 'turn-over' for the initial shot on the morning of December 13, 1955 — being the first day of two weeks' shooting in Montevideo and, incidentally, the sixteenth anniversary of the battle — an eighteen-month period was to elapse during which there was further research, location hunting, casting and general preparation.

Clearly of primary importance was the gathering of the ships to portray the three cruisers and the *Admiral Graf Spee* and, to a lesser degree, HMS *Cumberland* which joined the British squadron lying in wait outside Montevideo after the battle for the German ship's presumed attempt to escape out to open sea.

Powell and Pressburger submitted a list of their requirements to the Admiralty and the response was that they could not be met. However, according to Powell in an interview in 1971, the Admiralty offered: 'if we tell you when you can get what you want and you'll come, then we'll give you the facilities'. A month later they phoned and said: 'if you go to Cyprus now and talk with Sir Guy Grant

*Top:* **Setting up a shot aboard HMS Birmingham at Malta, with the ship's company portraying the Ajax's crew watching the burning Admiral Graf Spee. Michael Powell (co-producer) is in the black sweater and white shoes beneath the camera.**



**As it was. HMS Exeter pictured in February 1940 and still bearing traces of repairs to the hull and splinter damage to her funnels. (IWM)**

the Commander-in-Chief he will give you three cruisers for one day!'

Having blithely dropped this little bomb-shell in the producers' laps, the Admiralty went on to enquire whether or not Jack Hawkins would be in the film — no doubt the recent production of *The Cruel Sea* prompting the question.

Powell was beside himself with anger; the call had come just as he and Pressburger were wrestling with a major casting problem. Before him now lay the formidable task of filming an entire naval engagement in one day, to be followed later by shooting refuelling sequences at sea; depicting complex scenes aboard a burning shrapnel-riddled ship; scenes on deck with hundreds of seamen cheering; and an extremely tight studio schedule at Pinewood to be met — yet the Admiralty seemed to be more concerned with one speaking part, oblivious of the complexities of film making.

Leaving his partner with the problems on the home-front, Powell immediately flew to Cyprus to talk with Grant and to set up the multi-camera filming aboard the three cruisers. Fortunately there were no actors required for this sequence, and the additional back-up support they would have needed in the form of make-up and wardrobe facilities was not necessary. Neither, of course, was there a requirement for lighting or art department personnel — there was nothing to light and there were no sets to be constructed. Consequently Powell's unit was reduced to the number of crew required for each camera plus subordinate assistant directors, which indeed gave him more mobility: nevertheless filming all the principal master sequences for a major naval battle was still a daunting prospect.

Luck in an historical vein was with the production, for among the cruisers 'on offer' at Cyprus was *Achilles*; no longer a 'Kiwi' ship she was now named *Delhi* and serving with the Indian Navy. Built in 1932 as one of five Leander class cruisers, during the battle she carried eight 6-inch guns in four turrets — two forward and two aft — although by the time that the film was made she had lost her X turret.

HMS *Exeter*, a smaller County class vessel constructed in 1929, carried the heaviest armament of the three ships that fought the *Graf Spee* (six 8-inch guns in three turrets — two forward, one aft) and had been lost in action against the Japanese in the Java Sea in March 1942. A Colonies class cruiser HMS *Jamaica*, dating from 1940, mounting initially twelve 6-inch guns in four turrets (later the X turret was removed in preference for additional anti-aircraft weaponry) was cast as the *Exeter* with whom she bore a reasonable resemblance. The *Jamaica* was to soldier-on (sailor-on?) with the Fleet into the 1960s.

The Flagship of the force HMS *Ajax*, like *Achilles*, was a Leander class ship with identical main armament; built in 1934 she had survived the war only to be despatched into the arms of the scrapman in November 1949.

HMS *Sheffield*, a Southampton class cruiser dating from 1936, was to become the *Ajax*. She was a ship with a distinguished war record having taken part in the sinkings of the *Bismarck* and *Scharnhorst*, and later, in the company of the *Jamaica*, had driven off the German cruisers *Hipper* and *Lützow* during the Barents Sea action in the New Year of 1942. Carrying twelve 6-inch guns in four turrets (later reduced to three) she was to become the sole survivor of her class, before finally succumbing to the scrapyard in 1969.

Apart from *Delhi* there was another veteran made available to Powell. Although she was filmed on a separate occasion off Malta and edited in to give the impression of joining Harwood's squadron off the River Plate, the *Cumberland* made a very brief appearance as herself. A County class, three-funneled cruiser

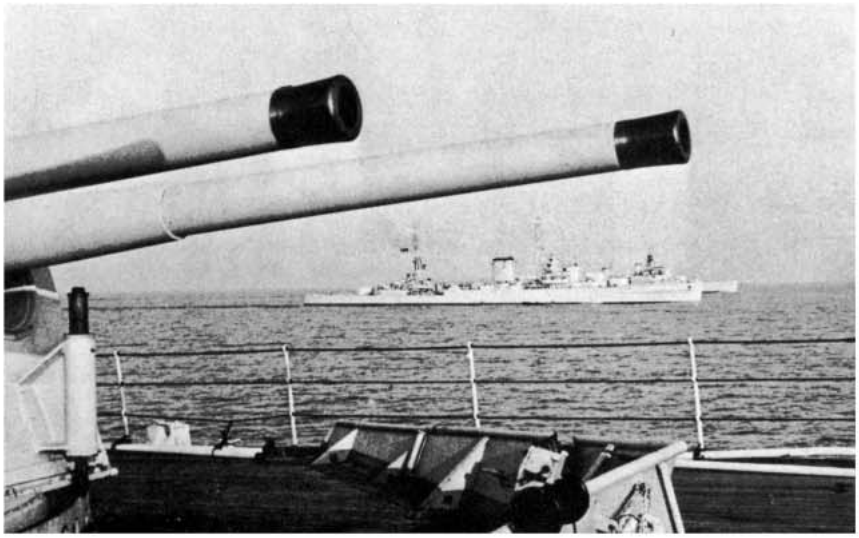
**The Film. HMS Jamaica 'doubling' as Exeter pouring out black and white smoke to simulate extensive battle damage. Also the guns and turrets have been set at odd angles in an attempt to portray the effects of direct hits. Avid enthusiasts might not agree but, apart from her triple gun turrets, Jamaica made a very reasonable Exeter.**

dating from 1926, she had originally carried eight 8-inch guns in four turrets. However her role and appearance had altered by 1956 for, although the last survivor of her class, she was minus her forward turrets. She was then being employed as a floating test-bed for new equipment, most notably a spectacular pre-wetting system of water jets to clear off atomic pollution. She was scrapped two years later.

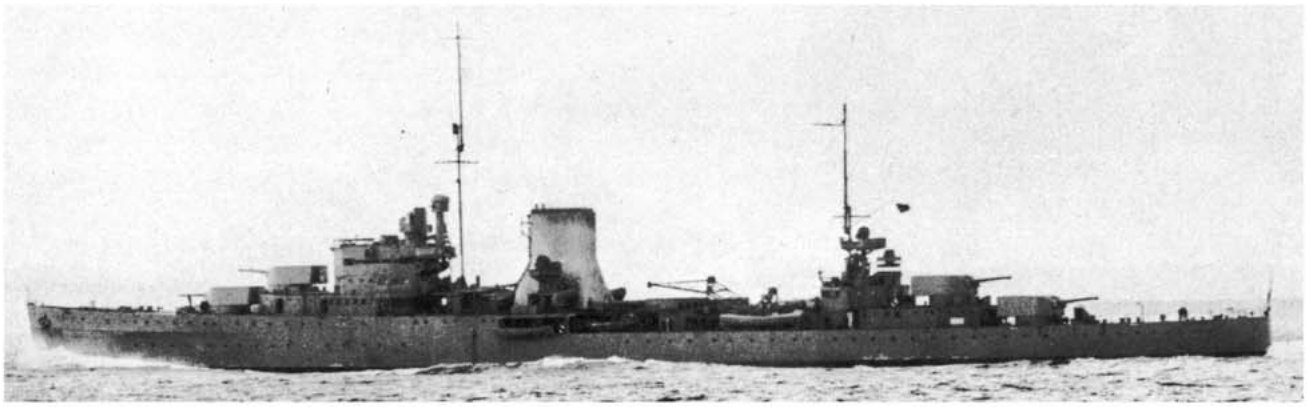
Powell and Pressburger had achieved a most revered naval quartet; the next item on the shopping list was a pocket battleship. This they secured by kind permission of the United States Sixth Fleet which allowed limited use of the heavy cruiser *Salem*. Although she bore no resemblance to the *Graf Spee* (but then what ship did?), her tall American superstructure, overall style of construction and size totally differed from the almost lady-like smallness of the older generation British ships — which was precisely what the producers wanted.

From a casting point of view John Gregson got top billing playing Captain Bell of the *Exeter*; the real Captain F. S. Bell being appointed naval adviser to the production. Powell felt that it would be helpful to Gregson if he met Bell prior to the filming and a rendezvous was arranged at London's Hyde Park Hotel. During the course of their conversation Gregson casually mentioned that he

*Above:* **The Ajax, with the Cumberland beyond, photographed at sunset on December 17, 1939. The crew can be seen mustered at every vantage point to see the last of the Graf Spee. (IWM)** *Below:* **Film re-creation with Delhi (formerly Achilles) with Jamaica beyond photographed from the deck forward of Sheffield's A Turret.**



*Above:* **HMS Sheffield as Ajax with B and Y turrets set to fire over open sights. Compared with the picture of Ajax's sister ship Achilles** *(below)* **the considerable difference between the Southampton and Leander classes is readily apparent. (IWM)**



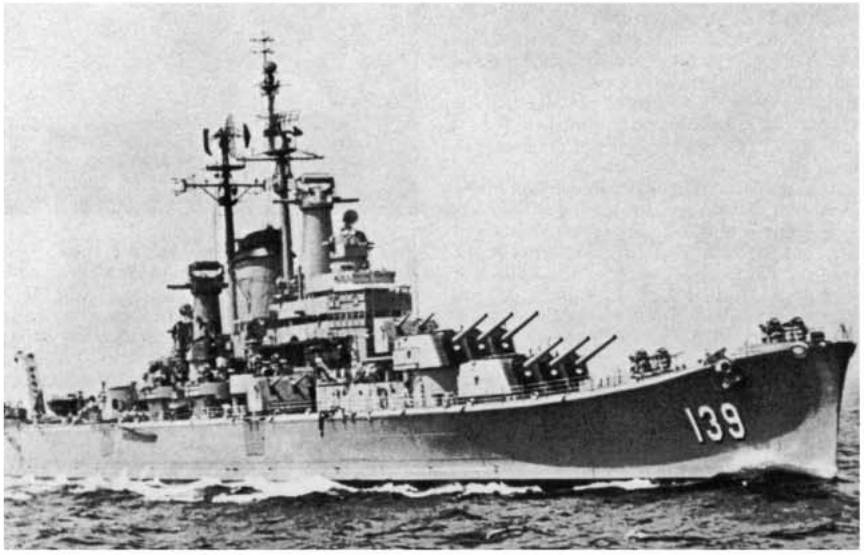
was intending to grow a beard for the part. Bell curtly replied that he *never* wore a beard, but there was one feature that he could adopt — the retired Captain wasn't known affectionately in naval circles as 'Hookie' for nothing. Bell had a glorious Roman nose and it was decided that Gregson should have his own built up for the role. Instead of skipping shaving for two months Gregson found himself having to report to make-up half an hour earlier every morning.

Anthony Quayle ably portrayed Commodore Harwood, whilst Captains Woodhouse (*Ajax*) and Parry (*Achilles*) were played by Ian Hunter and Jack Gwillim respectively. Bernard Lee — later to become very well-known for his role as 'M' in the Bond films — played Captain Dove of the MS *Africa Shell*, which was the fifth victim of the *Graf Spee*. Like Captain Bell, the real Captain Dove was employed in an advisory capacity — to contribute authenticity to the prison sequences aboard the German ship — for during the battle she was carrying a considerable number of British merchant naval officers and radio operators crowded into the midshipmans' quarters — taken prisoner before their ships were sunk.

Of the nine trading ships sunk by the *Graf Spee* only two are seen to founder in the film, both represented by models: the British tanker *Africa Shell* is seen burning (November 15) and the bows of the *Doric Star* (December 2) are seen to disappear beneath the special effects department's waves.

After the titles and an initial introductory narration over footage of rolling ocean, and a shot of the *Salem* the film opens with Bernard Lee as Captain Dove being taken to the *Graf Spee* in one of the *Salem's* motor vessels; a brief shot of two lifeboats heading for the nearby coastline purporting to be Portuguese East Africa shows the crew of the *Africa Shell* rowing to safety. Once aboard Lee is ushered to the quarters of Captain Langsdorff (Peter Finch) — a set constructed at Pinewood Studios incidentally displaying on the wall an aerial photograph of the *Graf Spee* at the Spithead Review rather than the *Salem* — where he protests formally to Finch about the loss of his ship. This was the first of several dialogue exchanges in the early part of the film between the two men that seemed to be deliberately sculpted to inform the viewer of the background detail of the story. Whilst the relationship between Langsdorff and Dove was probably enlarged for this reason, it also provided a vehicle to illustrate Langsdorff's genuinely chivalrous attitude toward his prisoners, and his concern for their well-being — although one critic considered that the film laboured this theme too heavily, citing the scene where the German crew present their prisoners with paper decorations and gifts on St. Nicholas's Day.

During the course of their initial meeting Lee — having first been offered a whisky from stock captured from the *Clement* (sunk September 30) and cigarettes from the *Huntsman* (sunk October 17) — he and Finch




**The American heavy cruiser Salem portraying the 'pocket battleship' — compare with the actual Graf Spee — *top* (IWM). The sequence from which this photograph was lifted was overlaid with ominous, menacing mood music together with a sombre narrative. This prompted one critic to write rather intensely of Powell's work: 'The most powerful passage . . . is the camera's chilling inspection of the battleship's grey silent mass, a vast, complex killing city, a technological Moby Dick, conspicuously invested with a Satanic nobility'. Ho hum.**

**Undeniably a photograph taken purely for publicity purposes, it shows make-up artist Geoffrey Rodway applying the final touches to John Gregson's wax nose whilst the real Captain 'Hookie' Bell provides the model. Apart from the nose Gregson also had lines etched on his face in an attempt to copy Bell's furrowed features.**

effectively inform the audience that the *Graf Spee* is a new ship capable of speeds in excess of 25 knots with immense firepower. Lee quotes the weaponry as six 11-inch guns and eight or ten 5-inch. Finch states that his orders are to sink merchant ships and to avoid a battle but Lee suggests that the *Graf Spee* might meet a superior British force. Finch's response is that the Royal Navy only has three ships of comparable armament that could catch him — the *Repulse, Renown* and the *Hood* — all the bigger battleships would be too slow. Lee suggests the speed of British cruisers and Finch dismisses them because of their smaller main armament.

The same scene goes on to describe how the *Graf Spee* makes her rendezvous with her supply ship the *Altmark*; and Finch tells Lee how 'without revealing specific details' a grid system is employed, so that he always knows where it will be on a given date.

From the British naval angle, their scenes also provided the audience with background information, for Anthony Quayle, inviting his three Captains to a conference aboard the *Ajax* (at station off the River Plate with *Exeter* and *Achilles*), explains in detail the events to date.

As Harwood's 'personal appreciation of the situation', Quayle opens by saying that he has received news of the German surface raider at large in the South Atlantic; that it may be the *Scheer*, *Graf Spee* or the *Deutschland*, having sailed from Kiel on August 21 and taking up position before war was declared. He continues: 'Up to September 30 she attacked no shipping. I can guess why not — Hitler thought that after the fall of Poland, Britain and France would make peace. However, on September 30 she sank the *Clement* — here off Pernambuco.'

Quayle goes on to catalogue the losses of the *Newton Beech*, *Ashlea*, *Huntsman* and *Trevanion*, explaining how the raider immediately leaves the area of the latest sinking to minimise the risk of detection. He refers to the sinking of the *Africa Shell* in the Mozambique Channel, presuming that the intention, having rounded the Cape, was to sail into the Indian Ocean and attack the India/Australia trade routes. He explains that the loss of the *Doric Star* (off West Africa) means that the raider has doubled back, and knowing that distress signals were picked-up would leave the area in a hurry.

Quayle continues: 'Now, in my opinion, she will do one of three things: (i) she'll double back into the Indian Ocean, (ii) she'll try to slip back to Germany — she came out through the Denmark Strait — or, (iii) before returning home, she'll come over here — to our part of the world — to make a last killing among the grain and wheat cargoes of South America. It's my instinct that that's exactly what she'll do.'

Having estimated the German ship's probable speed, Quayle concludes that if she doesn't head for Rio then she will arrive in their area on December 13 — the conference scene being set on the 12th: 'My object is the destruction of the enemy.'

There is one undated sequence depicting the *Graf Spee* meeting with the *Altmark*, and seamen are seen connecting up fuel lines and loading supplies, over which there is much dubbed German dialogue. Shots of Lee and Finch, however, are shown either against a studio ship's doorway or against back projection. They move on, this time actually on board a ship — albeit an anonymous British one and not the *Salem* — to an area where German sailors are carrying out camouflage work. Pointing to a freshly painted nameplate Finch says to Lee: 'One day I am the *Deutschland*, (the nameplate is turned over) next, the *Admiral Scheer*. Neutrals always report what they see, so I keep your Navy interested.' Turning to a wood frame and canvas structure being painted, he tells Lee: "This is going to be my new funnel

**The conference scene aboard Ajax. From left to right: Ian Hunter, John Gregson, Anthony Quayle, Patrick MacNee — as Lieutenant-Commander Medley — and Jack Gwillim. Lady Harwood and her son Lieutenant Stephen Harwood, RN, were present when this scene was shot at Pinewood, and earlier that week she had been instrumental in ensuring that the set dressing was accurate. This included the chintz curtains, the heavy, old fashioned mahogany desk ornamented with a photograph of Stephen as a boy and the table scattered with National Geographic magazines, the Commodore's favourite reading.**

— canvas. There — a new turret — wood'. A junior officer produces a copy of *Jane's Fighting Ships* and Finch refers to a particular photograph: 'That is our new silhouette.'

'An American heavy cruiser,' replies Lee, 'so that's why you've got a number painted on your bows.' The *Salem* had not been altered in any way and was filmed bearing her pennant number 139. In fact there were a number of shots taken aboard her with her personnel manning the anti-aircraft guns and wearing their regular American helmets and uniforms.

**Captain Langsdorff's quarters at Pinewood during the initial meeting between Bernard Lee and Peter Finch. Powell and Pressburger believed in plenty of pre-rehearsal for actors and camera personnel to reduce costly filming time. This method paid-off as this scene running four minutes and twenty seconds was secured in one 'take'. As with Harwood's cabin, care was taken to ensure authenticity. Amongst the set dressing were original German charts obtained from the Admiralty, photographs of Langsdorff's three children, and his favourite English naval books by Taffrail and others.**

**The Tiger Moth 'Seafox' preparing for 'take-off' from Ajax. Although the simulated double banks of exhausts are obscured in this photograph, it can be seen that two extra struts have been added forward of the centre section.**

Most notable was the scene of Bernard Lee coming aboard; accompanying crewmen and officers from the motor launch wore German uniforms — the crewmen being in white with American life-jackets and German helmets — whilst in the immediate background was an American uniformed crew manning a multiple AA gun.

The scene describing the attempts at cosmetically changing the *Graf Spee*'s appearance is concluded by Finch telling Lee: 'All officer prisoners are being transferred from the *Altmark*, you will have company tonight. We have finished our tour of duty; we are being replaced by another ship. Three months, Captain, we are going home for a bit of leave. I must take my prisoners with me.'

The extent of the camouflage deception being undertaken in the film appears exaggerated (the reference to the American heavy cruiser was included for obvious reasons) because the scene is at odds with the detailed account *Raider at Large* by Käpitan zur See Bidlingmaier published in Purnell's *History of the Second World War*.

According to Bidlingmaier, Langsdorff merely painted the front and side walls of his turret mast in a light colour, but painted the edges dark, thus counterfeiting a tripod mast; in this way he hoped to pass as an Allied warship when he next sighted an intended victim, which was the *Newton Beech*, captured on October 5 and sunk on the 7th. The Captain of the vessel admitted that the tripod mast had led him to believe that the *Graf Spee* was a French warship up to the last minute when the raider swung around. Two days later, the *Ashlea* fell foul of the same ruse as did the *Huntsman* on October 10, being finally sunk on the 17th. A twist of irony was that on the morning of October 14, as the *Graf Spee* approached its appointed rendezvous with the *Altmark*, her Captain got a considerable fright, for he too mistook her for a French warship!

Documents captured from his final victim, the *Streonshalh* sunk on December 7, led Langsdorff to believe that there would be rich pickings in the River Plate area; added to this a message told him that a British convoy, consisting of four ships and an auxiliary cruiser, was about to leave Montevideo. At 5.30 a.m. on December 13 two masts could be seen against the clear morning sky, and Langsdorff, presuming that it was the convoy, was sorely disillusioned when he found himself confronting the *Exeter*, and beyond, the *Achilles* and *Ajax*. Deciding that there was no alternative but to fight he opened fire on *Exeter* at 6.17 a.m.

## THE BATTLE

During the conference scene aboard *Ajax*, Quayle's closing remarks explained Harwood's strategy in the event of confrontation with the *Admiral Graf Spee*: 'My intention is to attack at once, day or night. She can outgun us and out-range us, so as soon as we sight the beast we'll close at maximum speed and divide her fire by attacking on separate flanks: *Ajax*, *Achilles* will attack in close company — *Exeter* will attack on her own [as she carried the heaviest armament]. This way, as well as splitting his armament, we can also report each other's fall of shot.' He went on: 'I wish I had the *Cumberland*, I need another 8-inch cruiser, but she's re-fitting at the Falklands [Harwood's Force G was based at Port Stanley], she won't be with us for another fortnight.'

Studio sets were built at Pinewood of the bridge areas and gun direction towers of each of the three ships, plus other miscellaneous sections, as necessary. An example was the area amidships on *Ajax* where her spotter-plane stood on a catapult, although it was filmed from an angle rendering the construction of the catapult unnecessary. The type of aircraft carried was a Fairey Seafox biplane with floats, and, needless to say, there was not an example available. Consequently, that doyen of so many aviation films, the Tiger Moth was substituted. Painted silver overall, its cowling was modified to simulate the double banks of exhaust outlets featured on the Seafox. For the flying sequence a model Seafox, catapult and a section of *Ajax* was built, the model being seen 'taking-off', whilst close-ups of the Tiger Moth provided the 'aerial' aspects.

The engagement with the *Graf Spee* was very carefully depicted, with excellent footage of the *Delhi*, *Jamaica* and *Sheffield* performing their parts whilst on exercise in the Mediterranean en route from Cyprus to Malta — these shots being intercut with their respective studio bridge areas. During a single day's shooting Powell managed to re-create all the major manoeuvres of the original action.

Captain Bell, as naval adviser, must have made his presence felt, for all the studio sequences depicting the scenes aboard the British ships have a strong air of accuracy and attention to detail about them. The combat sequences were centred around the British ships and the *Salem* is only featured very briefly two or three times — Peter Finch is not seen at all. The only occupants portrayed aboard the enemy vessel are the prisoners who dive for cover when she fires her first broadside.

The prisoner's reaction to the battle — that they can only hear — is shown as one of jubilation. That is, until aviation fuel seeping into their quarters from the ship's damaged Arado seaplane above them brings about a real fear of being burnt to death should it ignite. Unfortunately the script sounds very dated, with speeches like: 'We'll be burned to a crisp — like your Yorkshire pudding.' 'What's wrong with Yorkshire pudding?' is the aggressive retort. A young Anthony Newley, playing the obligatory cheerful cockney, quips to a colleague: 'When I'm done this side, turn me over will you.'

All of the *Graf Spee*'s gunfire is provided by model turrets, but the British ships let off a

couple of salvoes (covered by multiple camera set-ups). The *Jamaica* is seen firing and, later, belching out large plumes of black and white smoke to simulate the extensive damage that *Exeter* suffered. *Delhi* is also seen firing her aft Y turret.

The portrayal of the agonies of the *Exeter* during the battle required the use of an additional ship upon which to film. The Dido class cruiser *Argonaut*, dating from 1941, was supplied by the Admiralty and the art department and special effects personnel set about transforming her into the crippled *Exeter*, which included setting fire to parts of her and the building of at least one gun turret. Naturally, because of the pyrotechnics being employed, the Naval authorities at Portsmouth where the sequence was to be filmed were advised of the date when these effects would be used. Unfortunately they were not made aware of the full-scale rehearsal that was held on the day prior to the filming and every firefloat in the harbour sped to *Argonaut*'s assistance when she burst into flames. The film graphically details the cruiser's ordeal through the battle; which included splinters riddling the bridge, wrecking the wheelhouse, leaving only Captain Bell, who was wounded, and two other officers alive. Bell was reduced to controlling the ship from aft, using a boat compass and a chain of messengers.

The extent of the damage to the ship is worth relating. She was three feet down in the bows having taken in about 650 tons of water; her A and B turrets were wrecked by direct hits, and although Y turret remained in action — due to the bravery of the Gunnery Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Jennings, who stood on top of it in spite of the blast shouting spotting directions (referred to in the film) — this was finally put out of commission by the flooding cutting off its electrical supply. Apart from the peppered bridge, the gun control tower and transmitting station were wrecked; all telephones were cut and radio communication with the Flagship had broken down. Fierce fires were raging in the Chief Petty Officers' mess and kitchens, with minor fires breaking out in various other positions and most of the hoses were cut by splinters. Despite this, the engine room remained intact and *Exeter*, although slowly sinking, was still capable of maintaining speed.

At that point Captain Bell was considering ramming the *Graf Spee*, but was prevented by Harwood who, by now aware of the cruiser's grim situation, ordered him to disengage and head for the Falklands. In the film the order is couched: 'Can you make the Falklands?' Standing amid the shambles of his ship Gregson's reply is: 'Can reach Plymouth — if ordered. Request permission to revise list of spares.' (Harwood had repeatedly asked Bell to hasten the completion of the list in the period prior to the battle.)

Shell hits and resultant damage to the *Ajax* and *Achilles* were for the most part only referred to verbally, whilst a model of the *Salem* got straddled or hit by the British salvoes. An exception was the splinter damage inflicted upon the bridge and gun direction tower of the *Achilles* which wounded Captain Parry and almost all of the occupants of the tower, including the Gunnery Officer played by Conrad 'William Tell' Phillips. This effectively stopped all her guns from firing for three to four minutes while the gun control personnel reorganised. Sporting a bloody head bandage, Phillips informs his Captain that the guns are back in control and phlegmatically dismisses the considerable splinter damage as 'a few new ventilation gaps'.

Back on the bridge Jack Gwillim concentrating on the action through binoculars, having had his right leg bandaged by an orderly, is surprised that his other leg is also injured. 'Good Lord, I never noticed,' he remarks.

**Incarcerated in the midshipmans' quarters, the prisoners listen anxiously to the battle raging about them. Bernard Lee as Captain Dove clutches the pillar for support against the concussive effects of the gunfire. The grey haired officer on the left clutching the beads is the real Captain Dove who played a small part as the master of the Graf Spee's last victim, the Streonshalh.**

Clyde Jeavons in *A Pictorial History of War Films* criticised the film for 'extolling the naval tradition of stoicism (serious wounds are disregarded by their recipients . . .)' but even if over-dramatised on the screen, the real Captain Parry was only made aware of the extent of his wounds, when a sick-berth Petty Officer said: 'Now the other leg, please sir.'

Aboard the *Ajax*, one 11-inch hit, landing on the upper deck, had gone through three cabins, hit X turret's ammunition lobby killing or wounding nine men in the process, before finally being deflected upwards and bursting in Commodore Harwood's cabin destroying it together with his golf clubs (referred to in the script). This event is depicted by an extremely brief (five second) scene made up of three shots. The first showed four seamen being blown off their feet by a large explosion, immediately followed by a shot of a vivid red line instantly tracing the path of the shell across the deck; a flash as it hit the wall, where it proceeded upward with an equally violent velocity; another flash as it drilled through the next level, whereupon the film cut to Harwood's cabin being destroyed — the third camera shot.

At 8.00 a.m. Harwood and his two Captains were astonished to discover that the *Graf Spee* was steaming westward at a fairly high speed, and by 8.30 a.m. *Achilles* and *Ajax* had settled down to follow at a range of fifteen miles, helped by the funnel smoke from the German ship's diesels.

Although the pocket battleship occasionally fired at her shadowers — what Anthony Quayle referred to as: 'That means, "keep off the grass" ' — the pursuit continued all day until after nightfall.

Below decks, the prisoners speculated on the outcome of the engagement; and when the *Graf Spee* appears to slow down (portrayed by the model) Lee suspects that Langsdorff is intending to let the British cruisers overtake him in the dark, and then turn rapidly for open sea and escape. The speculation is

**John Gregson being left in absolutely no doubt that the special effects boys have just written off his B turret and quite possibly his wax nose as well! It was this shell hit that peppered Exeter's bridge with lethal metal splinters that slightly wounded Bell but killed everybody else except for two other officers.**

brought to an abrupt halt, however, when a German officer enters and announces: 'Gentlemen, for you the battle is over. We are now in Montevideo harbour . . .'

The German officer was not quite telling the truth: the *Salem* never entered Montevideo harbour. All of her scenes were, like the British ships, shot in the Mediterranean; however she is seen in the film leaving Grand Harbour at Valletta re-enacting the *Graf Spee*'s final voyage.

Apart from 'Montevideo harbour' the island of Malta provided some of the other Uruguayan locations, and also it was here that some of the scenes aboard *Ajax*, *Exeter* and the *Graf Spee* were filmed, although it was necessary to resort to subterfuge. *Salem's* availability, as with the *Delhi*, *Jamaica* and *Sheffield* was, to say the least, restricted — leaving only the turretless *Cumberland*. This obviously produced the need for another warship to double for the absent vessels, and the Admiralty provided HMS *Birmingham* — a sister ship to the *Sheffield*. *Birmingham* 'stood-in' for the battered *Ajax* at station in the River Plate estuary during the scene between Commodore Harwood and Captain McCall; as the *Admiral Graf Spee* in harbour when thirty-six German dead are laid out on deck and the British prisoners are released, each saluting the coffins before leaving the ship; and as *Exeter* heading for the Falklands when her fifty-six dead are committed to the sea — the 'corpses' being played by men of *Birmingham*'s company as their shipmates pay their last respects.

It is interesting to watch how the film manages to switch between 'Montevideo' at Malta and the genuine article in Uruguay with apparent ease. The viewer is shown the German dead on board the *Birmingham* and then a parade of hearses (reputed to be the originals used in 1939) lined up along the actual jetty in Montevideo.

Filming at Malta was not without its irritations, as one morning's shooting was heavily disrupted by shooting of a different nature: three ships of the Italian navy and a French aircraft carrier were paying a courtesy visit. Majestically the ships steamed into harbour booming out salutes; and each time a ship saluted the men of *Birmingham* snapped to attention — this and the gunfire bringing all the filming to a literal standstill.

Other than Malta there was some filming around the Greek Islands, which probably included the *Africa Shell* sequence. Another

**John Gregson, amid the chaos and burning shambles of Exeter, telling Lieutenant-Commander Smith (Guy Verney) to fire off the last of the torpedoes should a target present itself. The wounded sailor is the Captain's runner Bill Roper played by a youthful Barry Foster — better known in later years as television's Dutch detective Van der Valk.**

**Anthony Quayle and his men on the bridge of Ajax thrown off balance by a salvo from the special effects department. It was after this shot that the audience saw the spectacular destruction of Harwood's cabin by a German 11-inch shell.**

minor location was at Invergordon in Scotland where the *Altmark/Graf Spee* refuelling scenes were shot in a heavy sea employing a naval supply vessel and an unknown warship.

# THE TRAP

With the *Salem* moored in 'Montevideo', the film proceeds to unfold the second half of the story — the deception and the diplomatic intrigue.

Captain McCall, played by Michael Goodliffe, together with energetic assistance from Mr. Millington-Drake (Anthony Bushell), endeavoured to secure the German ship's internment for the duration. The alternative, as she appeared to be seaworthy — the battle damage seemingly superficial — was to compel her to leave after twenty-four hours (after sunset on Thursday 14th) according to International Law. A note to that effect was sent to the pro-British Uruguayan government.

However, McCall soon discovered that the last thing Harwood wanted was the *Graf Spee* out of Montevideo until such time that sufficient reinforcements would be available to ensure the destruction of the German ship.

In the film, Quayle and Goodliffe meet aboard the *Ajax*, and Quayle underlines the urgent need to keep the *Graf Spee* bottled up. The meeting did take place but not until Saturday, December 16. On the previous day McCall had received his initial instruction from Harwood through a commercial cable channeled via the Falklands which was an extremely slow method of communication, there not being a direct radio link.

The nearest reinforcements were the battle cruiser *Renown* and the carrier *Ark Royal*, both refuelling at Rio, and Quayle, although by now having gained the *Cumberland* to replace *Exeter*, stresses that the *Graf Spee* must be kept in harbour until the following Tuesday at least.

On Thursday morning a Uruguayan commission inspected the *Graf Spee*'s damage and their assessment concluded that repairs could be completed within forty-eight hours. (In the event they were granted a period of seventy-two hours which would expire at 8.00 p.m. on Sunday 17th.) This flabbergasted the Germans as they had requested two weeks. These repairs, of course, only included those necessary to bring her up to a seaworthy state — for example her galleys had been destroyed — as under law it was forbidden for a warship in a neutral port to undertake repairs that would reinstate its battle efficiency.

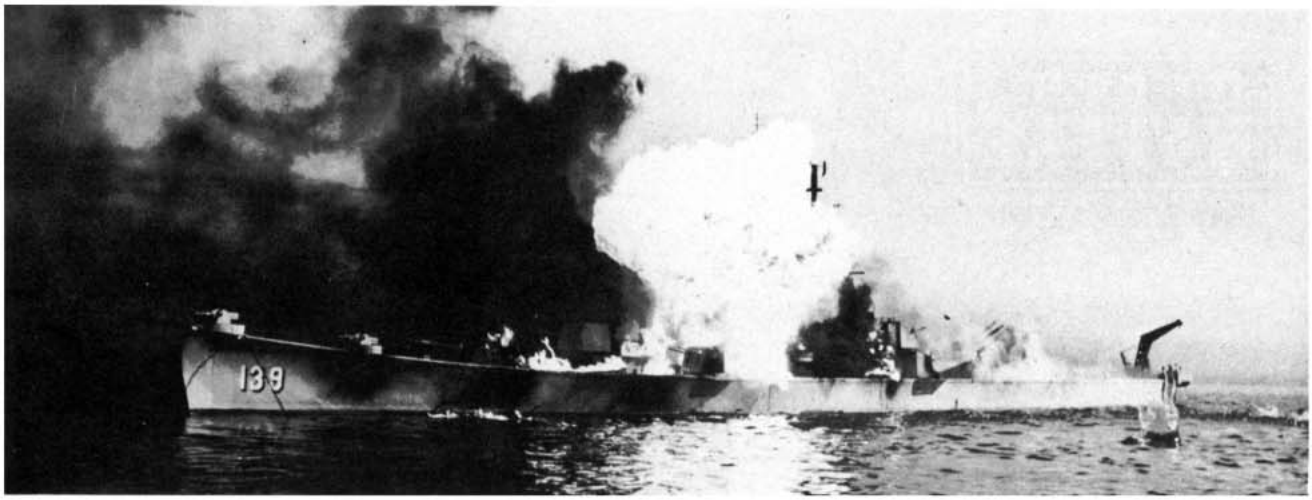
**Captain Parry getting his splinter wounds dressed aboard the bridge of Achilles. Behind him can be seen the 'few new ventilation gaps' in the ship's splinter-riddled gun direction tower — nicely painted by the art department!**

Another point of law and delaying tactic that McCall and Millington-Drake appreciated — and utilised — was that in a state of war any merchant ship of one nation wishing to depart from a neutral port must be given a twenty-four hour head start before any warship of the opposing nation in that port can do likewise. There were a number of British merchantmen in Montevideo harbour and a note accepted by the Uruguayan government — which was dutifully passed on to the German Embassy — informed them of the sailing of the SS *Ashworth* on the evening of Friday the 15th.

The next day they re-employed this measure and announced the pending departure of another vessel that evening, which legally would delay the *Graf Spee* until the evening of Sunday the 17th. Dr Guani, the Uruguayan Foreign Minister, accepted this second note but underlined that he would accept no more as the Germans had formally announced that the *Graf Spee* would be sailing on Sunday.

Although legally restricted, there was physically very little that could prevent the German ship from departing at any time she chose once her repairs were complete. By law

**The Admiral Graf Spee makes her exit from Montevideo — courtesy of the 17,000-ton US heavy cruiser CA139 Salem and Grand Harbour, Valletta. In 1955 Malta was still a thriving Royal Naval base — the Admiralty floating dock can be seen in the background. In the foreground the King George V Hospital for Merchant Seamen — now known as Sir Paul Boffa Hospital.**



**The Film. 'Sunset, December 17, 1939'. Shepperton studios 1956: the model Salem being gutted by a series of explosions. Although the model makers and special effects personnel took great pains to re-create the scuttling as accurately as possible, the oversize 'scale' of the water in the tank defeats the illusion — particularly the splash below the crane. Smoke and flame is more in proportion, if a little spectacular.**

the Uruguayans were compelled to prevent any attempt but they were in no position to do so; their naval presence aboard the *Graf Spee* was four ratings and a petty officer armed with a pistol.

McCall and Captain Rex Miller of British Intelligence (changed in the film to Ray Martin) racked their brains to conceive a way to prevent or delay the departure and finally dreamed up a plan to get the Germans to believe that heavy British naval reinforcements would be joining Harwood's small force by Saturday night. Simply, the plan was to order enough fuel oil for two capital ships, and to make sure the news was leaked to the Germans. Knowing that the line between Montevideo and Buenos Aires was tapped, McCall telephoned the ambassador there Sir Esmond Ovey, telling him that he had a message of extreme urgency. Ovey cautioned McCall not to use the open line, but McCall said that the message was far too urgent to be encoded. He proceeded to tell Ovey that the Admiralty had asked for two thousand tons of fuel oil to be made available that evening at Mar del Plata, the Argentine naval base. Ovey, extremely quick on the uptake, asked McCall to repeat the message slowly. The news of the 'reinforcements' later appeared in the Argentine and Uruguayan press with rumour and speculation becoming correspondingly rampant; the British ships changing in number and identity hourly. One witness claimed to have seen the battleship *Barham* off the coast, at which point in the film McCall turned to Martin and said: 'He must have very good eyesight. The *Barham*'s in dry dock at Gibraltar.'

In the film Goodliffe makes the telephone call but, for dramatic purposes, Ovey's response down the receiver is changed to one of uncomprehending anger at Goodliffe's apparent stupidity for disregarding security.

Sunday the 17th was a particularly beautiful day, and the film shows scenes of crowds milling around Montevideo's harbour and streets having heard on the radio that there may be a big sea battle imminent within their sight.

An American news reporter had established himself on a high building in the town and had been effectively broadcasting events to the world as they happened since the *Graf Spee*'s arrival. The film used this character quite extensively, to illustrate and describe the closing sequence of events. For some reason the reporter Mike Fowler (Lionel Murton) had his equipment set up on a cafe veranda which was supposed to overlook the harbour. Shot from the back he is seen once only, looking toward the crowds to establish the location; every other scene is shown from the front on a studio set — in fact he was the only actor in the film who actually went to Montevideo.

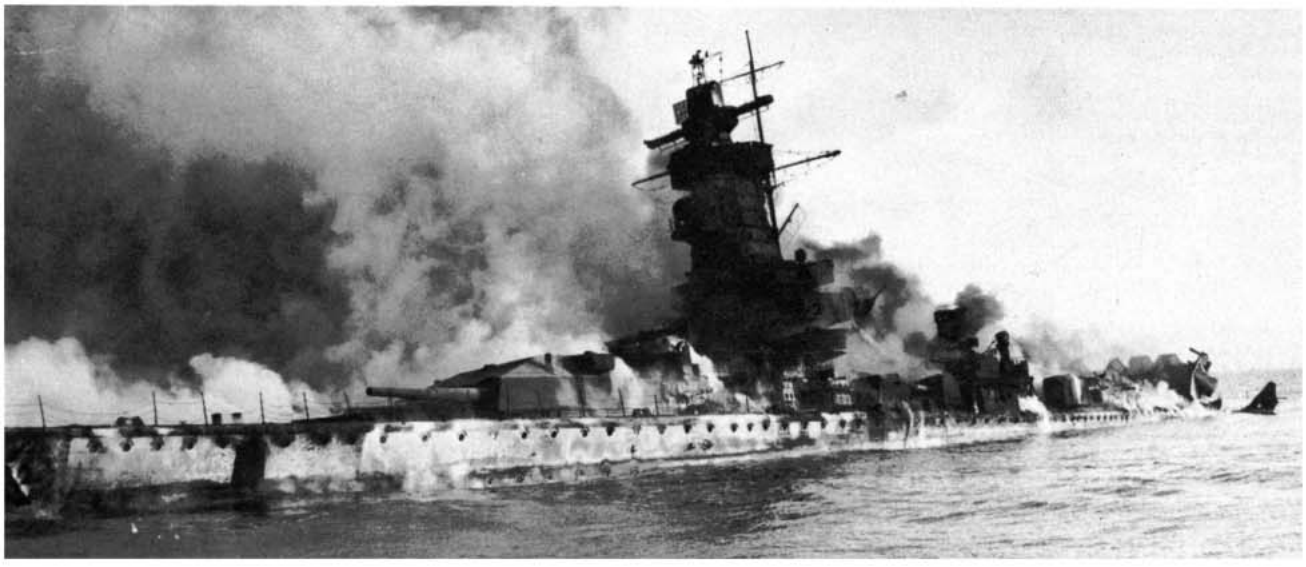
The *Salem* steams slowly out of the harbour with Murton describing in detail everything as it happens, building towards the climax; the film cutting between the ship and the expectant crowds, Millington-Drake and his companions, Miller and McCall, the waiting British ships and the cafe. Exactly at sunset the model *Salem* is ripped apart by several large explosions and bursts into flame with Murton's narration reaching an emotional crescendo.

The film closes with a shot of the three cruisers in a line-astern formation silhouetted against the sunrise, over which Murton concludes his narration.

Prior to this there is a final brief exchange between Lee and Finch, purportedly aboard the German merchant ship *Tacoma*, the film making no reference to Langsdorff's subsequent suicide.

Viewed today, sections of the picture look and sound rather dated, and I must agree with some of Jeavons' criticisms regarding the not inconsiderable level of stoicism depicted. However, having said that, for me the strength of the film lies totally in the battle sequence, because it portrays an accurate (to me at least) insight into what naval warfare of the forties must have been like. Another aspect is that it is probably the only film that has recorded in colour for posterity four British warships that represent a classic period in the history of the Royal Navy.

**As it was. A picture that was to become world famous: the burning hulk of the Graf Spee. The Admiralty immediately bought the wreck and according to Admiral Sir Henry McCall the reputed sum paid was £14,000. (See over, pages 38-39.)**

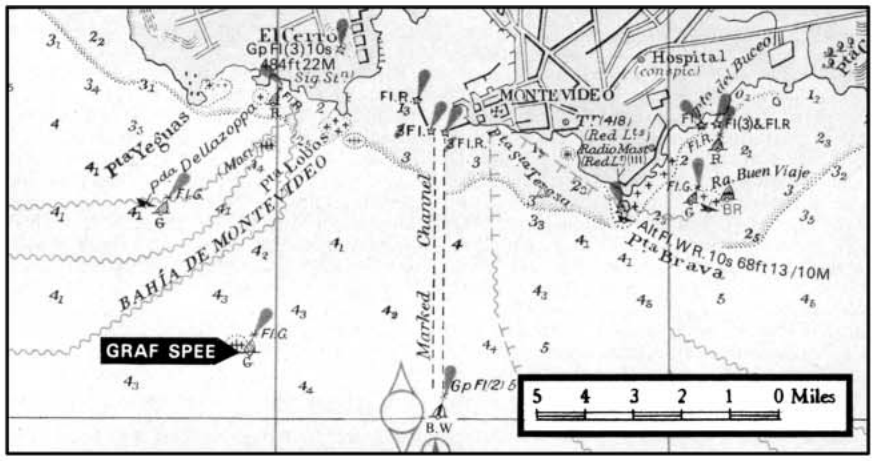


# THE GRAF SPEE—WHAT NOW REMAINS?

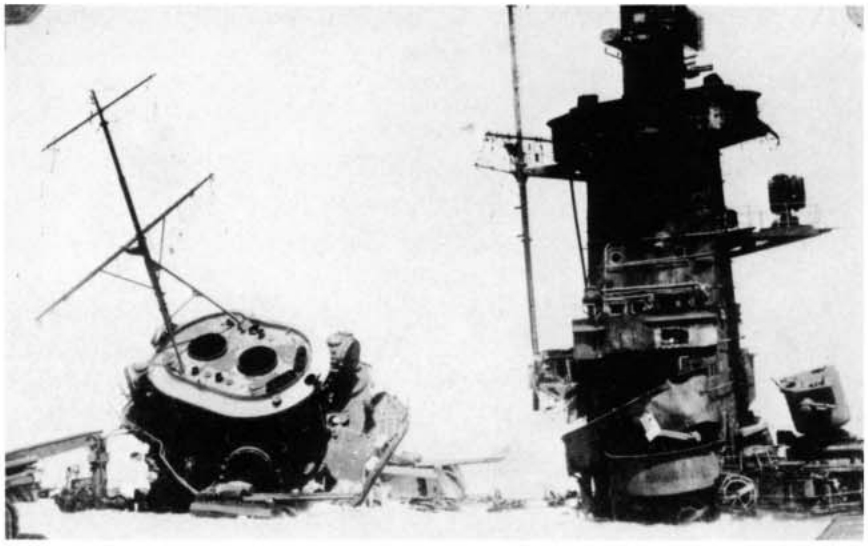
As the echoes of Second World War's first large scale naval battle faded from the mouth of the River Plate, the twisted wreck of the *Admiral Graf Spee* settled upright in the thick mud of the estuary. At the position where she died, four miles from shore, the water was just over four fathoms — twenty-four feet — and not nearly enough to cover her, and the heavy tower bridge with its rangefinder arms still intact formed a symbolic marker.

The ship had been well photographed, both in port at Montevideo by US Intelligence, and out in the estuary by local newsmen. When pictures of the *Graf Spee* reached London more than a little interest was shown in the unusual aerial array still intact above the rangefinder. Remember that in 1939 radar was still in its untried infancy, and any information which could be gained of the enemy's progress in this field at such an early stage in the war was priceless.

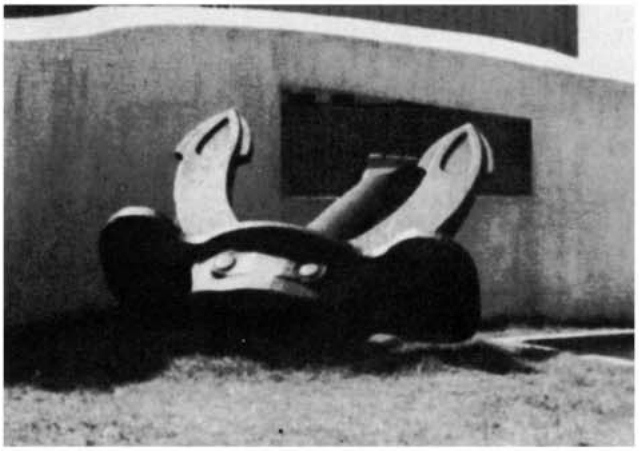
Incredible as it may seem, within a few weeks British Intelligence agents in neutral Uruguay, posing as scrap metal merchants and working through a South American intermediary, had managed to purchase the wreck for less than £20,000. It seems that the Germans urgently needed foreign cash to finance their own undercover operations in the area and sold the *Graf Spee* as scrap believing that nothing of value had survived the scuttling demolitions. More than this is conjecture as both British Intelligence and the Admiralty appear, even now, to want to keep the details secret — no mention of the purchase is made in the official history of British Intelligence published as recently as 1981, and the official Admiralty file No. 639650/12 is unknown at the Public Record Office. The fact that the deal went through is substantiated by Sir Eugen Millington-Drake, British Minister in Montevideo at the time of the battle (and compiler of probably the best book published on the battle: *The Drama of Graf Spee and the Battle of the River Plate* published by Peter Davis Ltd.), and confirmed by the Deputy Director of Naval Construction who was sent to Montevideo after the wreck became British property to examine and salvage the radar equipment. Ken Purvis revealed details of the long-kept secret in March 1977: 'I was given my cover as a scrap expert from the Sheffield firm of




**The closeness of the scuttling position gave the local population a grandstand view of the final drama. (Reproduced from Admiralty chart 1749 Crown Copyright)**



**Although no longer visible, photographs of the battered hulk of the Graf Spee are still on sale to tourists in Montevideo.**



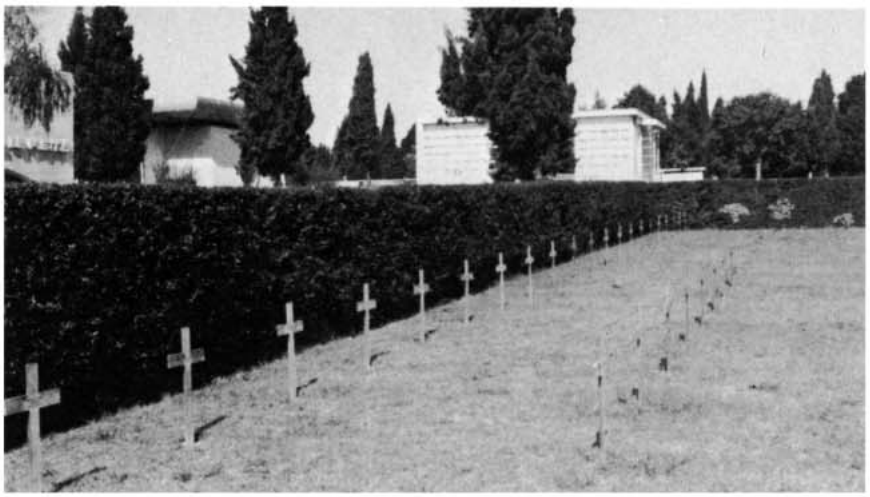
*Left:* **The bell from the Ajax, pierced by a German shell splinter during the battle, was presented to the city of Montevideo in July 1949 and unveiled in the Square in front of the Uruguayan Inspectorate of Marine on the tenth anniversary of the battle — December 13, 1949.** *Right:* **Just fifty metres away lies one of the anchors from the Graf Spee. (J. C. Soler)**

Thomas W. Ward, and a false passport. On March 9, 1940 I set off with a young naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Guy Kilroy, a torpedo expert.'

On arrival in Montevideo they made contact with two more British technicians: Bainbridge-Bell on radar and Stanley Dyal, a genuine salvage expert. For two months the small team examined the wreck from stem to stern, reportedly watched by German agents aboard a yacht.

Having given up her secrets, the *Graf Spee* was left to slowly sink into the soft mud of the estuary and by 1948 only the foretop was visible. With the cessation of hostilities the National Ports Administration in Uruguay undertook the job of removing as much as possible for scrap but during the operation the lifting crane *DH2* sank in a storm with loss of life and further salvage attempts by the NPA were abandoned. In April 1970 a German tugboat *Argus 2* operated by the salvage firm of Harms Argentina came over from Buenos Aires with a team of divers to inspect the wreck and evaluate the possibility of raising her. They concluded that as the ship had now settled on her side deep in the mud it would not be an economical operation. Japanese divers however managed to remove some of the armoured deck and today the wreckage is owned by the Reguciy Voulminot shipyard.

A more interesting fate befel the *Tacoma* — the German cargo ship which took off the *Graf Spee*'s crew and transferred them to Argentinian tugs after the scuttling. Her act was seen to be belligerent by the Uruguayan Government and she was interned on January 1, 1940. She later served with the Uruguayan transport fleet until 1966 and was used in latter days as a prison ship while anchored in Montevideo harbour. She is currently awaiting scrapping.



**German graves in the Cementerio del Norte (North Cemetery). (J. C. Soler)**

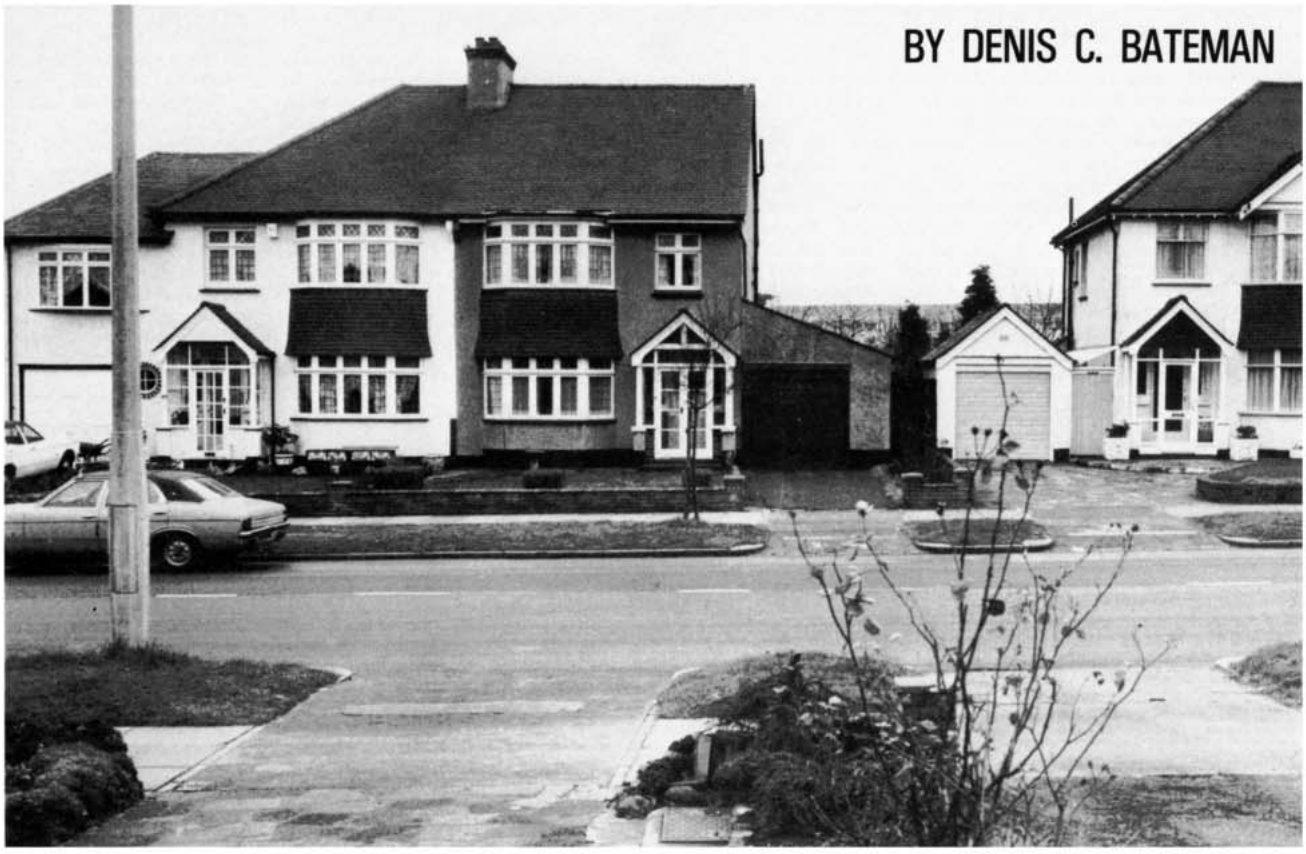
The crew of the *Graf Spee* were also interned, many marrying local girls. Most of these, numbering some 300 or so, now live in the Argentine with an enthusiastic hard core of 150 belonging to the *Graf Spee* old comrades association which holds regular memorial services at the graves of the German (and British) casualties of the action. Most of the former were buried in Montevideo Cementerio del Norte and the British at sea. Because of the prevailing tides, and possibly lack of sufficient ballast weight, three of the British bodies still wrapped in their canvas shrouds were washed ashore at Pando, fifteen miles east of Montevideo. It was the grim task of the then-clerk of the British Consulate, Mr. A. T. MacIntyre, to inspect the corpses for any identity prior to their reburial in the British cemetery at Montevideo. Two bodies were identified as being crewmen of the *Achilles* — Ordinary Telegraphist N. J. Milburn and Telegraphist F. Stennett — two of the four killed on that ship.

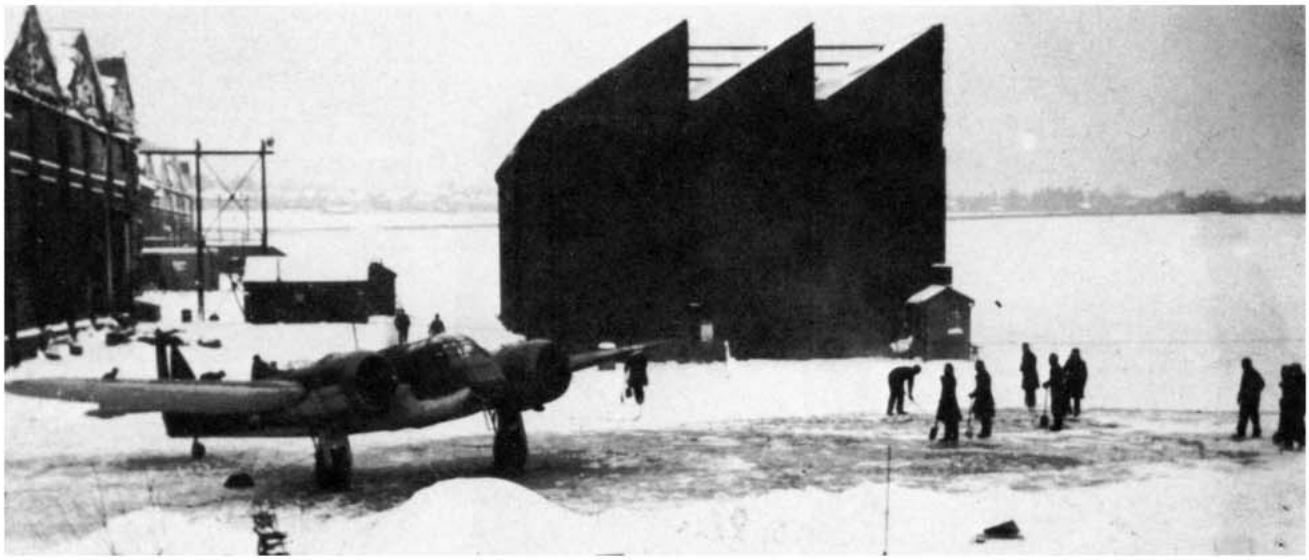
Kapitän zur See Hans Langsdorff committed suicide during the night of December 19 in his room in the Naval Arsenal near the North Dock in Buenos Aires where the German officers had been interned. He was found the next morning shot through the temple lying on the ensign from the *Graf Spee* and was buried in the German Cemetery in the city.

**In 1950 an anchor from the Ajax was erected as a memorial at Punta del Este, 130 kilometres east of Montevideo. (J. C. Soler)**

# NIGHT SOLO TO ETERNITY

BY DENIS C. BATEMAN





**A Blenheim of No. 92 Squadron pictured at Croydon the month before the fatal crash. The houses of Foresters Drive can be seen on the far side of the drome. (Imperial War Museum)**

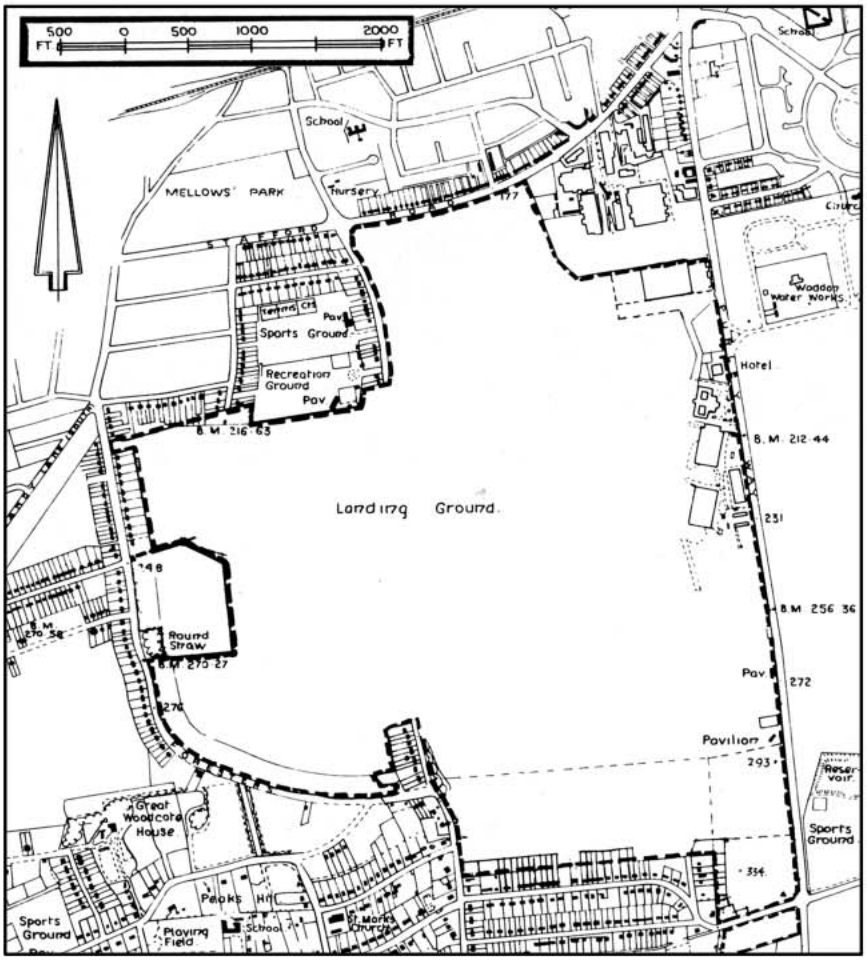
After a fine day the evening of Saturday, February 24, 1940 was clear but dark beneath cloud nearly ten/tenths high. At Croydon aerodrome, former airport of Imperial Airways and pre-war scene of the triumphs of Amy Johnson, Jim Mollison and others, activity was the keynote. Croydon, in this sixth month of the war, was the base of two RAF fighter squadrons, Nos. 92 and 145. Both squadrons had been engaged in flying during this Saturday as they took advantage of the first fine day for weeks.

At No. 45 Foresters Drive in the quiet residential district of Wallington, Surrey, the adults of the Bridge household may well have been listening to the wireless, a favourite Saturday evening pastime for most people. At this time, just before 7.00 p.m., the BBC had two offerings for the long-suffering public. On the Home Service was variety from the Argyle Theatre, Birkenhead, to be followed at 8.00 p.m. by Garrison Theatre (in reality, a studio programme) with Jack Warner; whilst on the Forces Programme Tommy Kinsman and his Band were just concluding a half-hour programme of dance music. At 7.00 p.m Alan Melville would be conducting a survey of the Scottish borders. If they were so inclined the Bridges' may have been looking forward to an excerpt from the musical 'Haw-Haw', with Max Miller, Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon, broadcast from the stage of the Holborn Empire. Quite likely the Bridge children, 9-year-old Jack and 5-year-old Jill, had listened earlier that evening to Children's Hour following the 'Extraordinary affair of Ernest the Policeman', one of the 'Toytown' adventures by S. G. Hulme-Beaman. Unbeknown to them, however, this peaceful scene was to become within minutes one of tragedy and destruction.

If the Bridges' heard the sound of aircraft overhead they would almost certainly have ignored it, so used would they have been to the noise as aircraft passed over the house which stood on the edge of Croydon aerodrome. In fact, the open, iron rail perimeter fence that surrounded the airfield stood at the bottom of the Bridges' back garden and was patrolled by soldiers from the Training Battalion, Scots Guards. On the airfield itself Pilot Officer Reginald Jervelund Whitmarsh, aged 20 years and 7 months, sat alone in the darkened cockpit of a Bristol Blenheim Mark I, the only illumination inside the aircraft coming from the instrument panel. Nervous and none too experienced, Whitmarsh was preparing for his first solo night flight in a Blenheim.

The night-flying programme for No. 92 Squadron on February 24, 1940, commenced at 5.15 p.m. Four Bristol Blenheims were made available for the task which was divided into four details, Pilot Officer Whitmarsh taking part in two of them: dusk landings and dual instructions. Although cloud obscured the moon the horizon was visible all round and the darkness caused no difficulty.

Whitmarsh proceeded to carry out three perfect landings, then at about 6.15 p.m. he took-off in Blenheim L6724 accompanied by Flight Lieutenant Vincent G. L. D. Byrne, the acting Commanding Officer of the squadron, who sat in the first pilot's seat with Whitmarsh as second pilot on the right-hand side of the cockpit. After making the necessary checks Byrne took-off, climbing to about 15,000ft, where he made a circuit of the aerodrome before landing. Byrne then changed seats with Whitmarsh and ordered him to take-off. Whitmarsh took the aircraft to 1,200ft and made a circuit of the airfield before being ordered to land. After an excellent landing Byrne ordered him up again and this time he made circuits at 1,000ft




**In the E-W direction the grass field provided a runway of 1,120 yards. Ordnance Survey sheets Surrey XIVSW and XXNW. Crown Copyright.**

**The burned out shell of No. 45 Foresters Drive. The aerodrome lies behind the house. Like so many wartime incidents the morning after was always the same: Wellington-booted relief workers, the demolition of unsafe brickwork and the spreading of tarpaulins. (All contemporary photos by Planet News.)**

before landing. Once more Byrne ordered another take-off and on landing asked Whitmarsh if he felt confident and was assured that he did, whereupon Byrne ordered him to go solo for one circuit. Leaving the aircraft Byrne told the aerodrome control officer to watch the circuit and to give Whitmarsh priority in landing.

Taking-off normally straight down the flare path the aircraft climbed to between 250 and 300ft before, according to Byrne, diving at an angle of approximately 30 degrees, the pilot apparently making no effort to check the dive, Blenheim L6724 hit Nos. 45 and 47 Foresters Drive and exploded, both houses and the aircraft catching fire. The time was 7.00 p.m. Pilot Officer Whitmarsh had just 1 hour 45 minutes training in dusk take-offs and landings and 1 hour 30 minutes dual night-flying the Blenheim to his credit. His total flying time was 188 hours 10 minutes, of which approximately 77 hours were dual.

Almost one month later Mr (later Sir) Folliat Sandford, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, replied to a letter from the Joint Hon. Secretary of the Beddington and Wallington Ratepayers' Associaton. Mr Sandford wrote: 'In the case of the accident on the 24th February, the pilot in question was fully qualified and had flown solo at night. He could, in fact, most certainly be regarded as a reasonably experienced pilot'. The Officer Commanding No. 11 Flying Training School had other ideas however. He reported that Whitmarsh had 'made slow progress' and was somewhat lacking in initiative. Encouragement and supervision would be needed for him to become a satisfactory pilot. Whitmarsh's instructor went further. He classified him as of such a nervous and sensitive disposition that he doubted if Whitmarsh 'would ever had made an efficient service pilot'.

At 7.00 p.m. that evening Mrs Veda Coombs of 33 Lakers Rise, Woodmansterne, Surrey, was walking past 46 Foresters Drive with her two children, when she and her daughter, Valerie, aged 5, were thrown to the ground by an explosion. Mrs Coombs was bruised and shocked, while Valerie was cut and bruised. They were taken home by car and next morning Mrs Coombs reported the incident to the police.

Mr and Mrs Samuel Way of 25 Foresters Drive, were also out walking that evening. As they passed the entrance to the aerodrome Mrs Hilda Way saw through the railings an aircraft taking-off and remarking to her husband that it was very low wondered if it would hit the houses. Hardly were the words out of her mouth than the aircraft crashed although neither of them remembered hearing any noise. Almost immediately the Ways saw flames rising in front of them from the houses on both sides of the road.

Croydon aerodrome was not the most popular of airfields. Surrounded by houses it was disliked by experienced pilots particularly at night, when one ex-pilot considered it to be 'a death trap'. The Ratepayers Association had some years previously sent a deputation to complain to Sir Philip Sassoon, Under-Secretary of State for Air, about the situation of the aerodrome and apparently some improvements had been made. However, the Association was still concerned, in particular with aircraft 'skimming' the houses on the perimeter before landing. Two months after the Blenheim accident Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, AOC-in-C, Fighter Command, wrote of his intention to evacuate Croydon 'as soon as possible, (except as a satellite)'. He added that the squadrons stationed there would be moved as soon as constructional work at Biggin Hill and Kenley was completed.

Wallington had suffered several air crashes during the years of peace, most of them involving civil aircraft; however, in November 1929 two RAF fighters collided and landed on property in the district, fortunately there were no casualties. Foresters Drive itself had been the scene of a fatal crash in May 1932 when an Air France mail and freight-carrying monoplane crashed into the Croydon radio mast killing the crew of two. The machine fell into the front garden of Nos. 9 and 11 Foresters Drive but luckily did not catch fire. In addition to the ever-present danger the inhabitants of Wallington were continually complaining of the noise caused by low-flying aircraft, particularly of the pleasure trip variety. (The author remembers being taken for a five shillings pleasure flight in a cabin biplane at Croydon one Sunday afternoon in 1938.)

No. 45 Foresters Drive was one of the better surburban houses dating from the middle 'thirties: brick-built, semi-detached (coupled with No. 43), with stucco facing, a red-tiled roof and bay windows on the ground and first floors. On the ground floor were two rooms and a kitchen, while the first floor consisted of four bedrooms, bathroom and wc. Attached to the house was a brick-built garage with a kitchen at the rear and a bedroom above. This was a recent addition and considerably increased the value of the house which was freehold and in 1940 valued at £1,200, a substantial sum. In front of the garage stood the Bridges' three-months-old 14hp Vauxhall saloon, JPA 694, priced at £200.

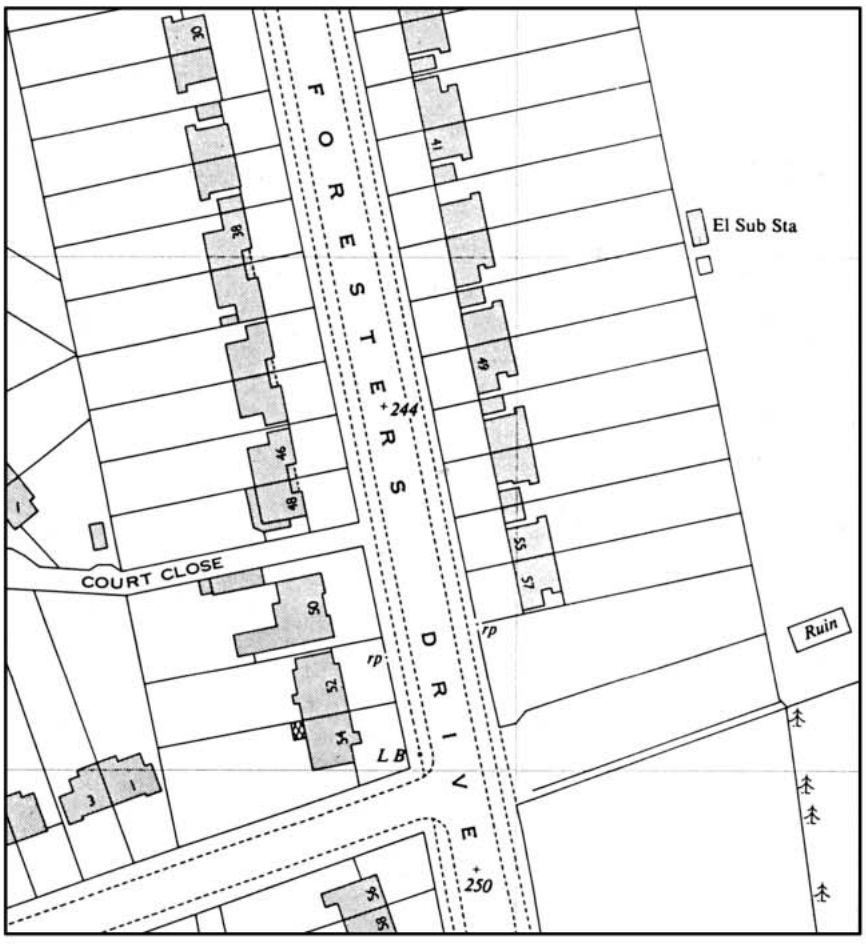
At 7.00 p.m. Blenheim L6724 diving uncontrollably, crashed onto the roof of 45 Foresters Drive and exploded enveloping the house in flames which spread to the family car just inside the front gate. The starboard engine landed on the driveway; the port engine, together with parts of the aircraft, shot across the road to land on top of the garages of Nos. 40 and 42, setting them on fire and catching alight the two Austin cars parked in the driveways. Both houses were also damaged. One wing and part of the

**No. 45 had been built in 1933 subject to covenants with the Air Ministry that it would not be higher than 60ft or nearer than 30ft to the aerodrome boundary. After the accident although the RAF used the garden as an allotment for the remainder of the war, it was not rebuilt until 1948 by a Mr W. P. Hunt. The present occupiers, Mr and Mrs J. W. Edney purchased the house in March 1949. Ironically John Edney was a fire brigade column officer, and had been called to the incident in 1940.**

undercarriage landed in the garden of No. 47, next door to 45, after damaging the house and garage. No. 43 escaped damage from the aircraft but suffered water damage from the hoses of the fire brigade. A fence at the rear was broken by the rescue and fire-fighting parties.

At one minute past seven an unknown person telephoned the Wallington Borough Council Fire Brigade; four minutes later ten appliances arrived and thirty firemen from the Brigade and Auxiliary Fire Service prevented the fires from spreading to other houses, eventually extinguishing them.

Scots Guardsmen John Lyall and William Mackenzie were outside the west guardroom of the aerodrome when the Blenheim crashed. Running towards the scene of the disaster, they saw a house enveloped in flames; as they climbed the boundary fence a man and a woman with two children ran out of the burning house into the back garden. The woman and one child, a girl, were on fire. Guardsman Lyall tore the clothes off the child and carried her to the guardroom accompanied by the boy. Meanwhile, another soldier, Guardsman Ronald Burpitt had arrived in time to help Mrs Bridge into the next-door garden and carry her into the house. Wrapped in an overcoat, her hair singed and her face charred, the unfortunate woman was naked, her clothes having been burnt off. Strangely, Mrs Bridge seems to have been allowed to wander away alone wrapped only in the overcoat, before meeting Dr William S. Moore. Dr Moore helped her to his surgery at 50 Foresters Drive and laid her on a couch where, upon examination, he found she was extensively burnt on her lower limbs. Leaving his daughter to apply tannic acid jelly to her poor flame-scorched body he went in search of an ambulance. He found an RAF ambulance driven by AC1 William Watterston, and Mrs Bridge was carried out on a stretcher and taken to Carshalton Memorial Hospital. With her was her husband and badly injured daughter. Little Jill Bridge had been taken to 37 Foresters Drive after leaving her burning home. At the hospital she was found to be suffering from second and third degree burns. She was burnt in a similar manner to her mother except that




**OS: TQ2963SE. Crown Copyright**

*Above:* **Directly opposite, these two Austins in the driveways of Nos. 40 and 42 were write offs. The nearer one has taken the full force of the port engine.** *Below:* **Nos. 51-53 and 55-57 in the background.**

the burns on her chest and abdomen were not so numerous. Sadly, mother and daughter died in the early hours of Sunday, February 25, Jill at 1.30 a.m., her mother five minutes later. Mr Montague Bridge was taken to hospital with third degree burns to the front of both hands and wrists. He discharged himself and went home the next afternoon. Young Jack Bridge was uninjured and placed in the care of William Grant of 4 Foresters Close.

When the Blenheim crashed Pilot Officer Whitmarsh was catapulted from the aircraft into the back garden of 40 Foresters Drive where he was found at about 8.15 p.m. Flying Officer M. O. Richardson, the station medical officer, had been called to the scene of the accident and had joined in the search for Whitmarsh. When he was discovered Richardson identified the body and certified death by multiple injuries. The only burns on the body were minute ones on the face and hands caused by drops of burning petrol. The body was removed to the May Day Hospital in Croydon in the same RAF ambulance used for the Bridge family and placed in the mortuary. Here it was undressed by AC1 Watterston and the parachute which had been strapped to the body taken back to the aerodrome where it was handed in to No. 92 Squadron the next morning.

An armed RAF guard was placed on the aircraft wreckage although little enough was left of the Blenheim, most of it having been consumed by the fire. The crash site was visited the next morning by Flight Lieutenant E. J. Gribben, the engineer officer from Kenley. He found the starboard main plane under some fallen masonry behind 45 Foresters Drive, part of the port main plane was under similar debris in the front garden. The port wing tip section was in the top bedroom of No. 47, the other section in the front garden, while the control column was found by the side of No. 40 in the remains of the demolished garage. The airscrew of the starboard engine was bent completely back with the tips broken off and appeared to have gone through the brickwork of the house. The

**Pilot Officer Whitmarsh was flung from the cockpit, over No. 40, and was found in the back garden.**

**Evidence of the crash by the smashed gate post of No. 40, now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Body. We complimented him on his beautiful repointed brickwork.**

port airscrew and reduction gear had been separated from the engine and also showed signs of contact with the house. Flight Lieutenant Gribben thought that the engines were running under power at the time of the crash.

At 7.30 p.m. Inspector Charles Giddy of Z Division, Metropolitan Police, received a telephone call informing him that an aeroplane had crashed at Foresters Drive. Eight minutes later he arrived by car at the scene. The Bridge house was 'burning furiously' as were the garages across the road; parts of the aircraft were also distributed on both sides of the road. The fire brigade was already fighting the fires. Inspector Giddy first enquired after the injured; later he saw the pilot's body being removed from the garden of No. 40 to the ambulance. Apart from the guardsmen witnesses, Giddy found no one who had seen the aircraft before the crash, although Mr R. J. Palmer of 40 Foresters Drive saw 'a blazing mass shoot across the road, striking the houses on both sides'.

On the following Tuesday, February 27, the inquest into the deaths of Reginald 'Jerome' Whitmarsh, Doris Grace May Bridge and Jill Bridge was held in the Carshalton Council Chamber. Mr Bridge was not fit to attend and was represented by a solicitor.

After questioning several witnesses and commending Guardsmen Lyall, Mackenzie and Burpitt for their actions, the Coroner, Dr C. J. Baron, summed up by saying that Whitmarsh had died of multiple injuries and the deaths of Mrs Bridge and her daughter were caused by extensive burns. The pilot had died 'no less bravely and gallantly' than if he had been in battle. The Coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death and expressed his sympathy to the relatives.

The Court of Enquiry into the accident to Blenheim L6724, ordered by Air Vice-Marshal W. L. Welsh, AOC, No. 11 Group, opened at 11.00 a.m. on Wednesday, February 28, 1940. The members consisted of the President, Squadron Leader B. C. Moody from Biggin Hill, Flight Lieutenant R. J. B. Jackson, also from Biggin Hill, Flight Lieutenant G. C. Bonner, Northolt and Wing Commander P. G. Tweedie of the Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry.

Thirty-two witnesses appeared before the Court, including Squadron Leader Roger Joyce Bushell, Officer Commanding No. 92 Squadron. On February 24, Bushell was absent from Croydon on special duty but had informed Flight Lieutenant Byrne that Whitmarsh was in need of further dusk landings, that he was to be given dual instruction at night and was not to fly solo unless Byrne was satisfied with him and 'it was a good night'. (Bushell was later shot down and taken prisoner, eventually being sent to Stalag Luft III. As one of those involved in 'The Great Escape' in March 1944, he was shot by the Gestapo, together with forty-nine other escapers.)

After considering the evidence the Court found that Pilot Officer Whitmarsh had been permitted to fly solo in complete darkness. Being inexperienced in the use of instruments in these conditions he failed to gain the necessary height thereby hitting the houses in Foresters Drive. This resulted in the complete destruction of the aircraft, the death of Whitmarsh, Mrs Bridge and her daughter, as well as incapacitating Mr Bridge for approximately two months. Six other civilians suffered from shock, one of whom was tubercular and whose illness may have been further aggravated. Considerable damage to civilian property occurred and was estimated at £22,570.

The Court also found that the aids to night-flying in the blackout, as laid down in a Headquarters, No. 11 Group letter of September 7, 1939, and in an RAF Kenley letter dated January 5, 1940, were not complied with because of the built-up area on the western side of the airfield. These instructions provided for a leading light to be situated 1,000 yards ahead of the last light in the flare path. After inspecting the aerodrome the Court concluded that a leading light placed some 800 yards from the last flare would have assisted Whitmarsh.

Furthermore, night-flying arrangements on the fateful evening were not in accordance with HQ, No. 11 Group Flying Standing Orders. These stated that when more than one squadron was using the aerodrome for night-flying on the same night, flying orders were to be the responsibility of station headquarters and one officer in charge of night-flying was to be appointed. (At Croydon an officer from both squadrons there was in charge of his own squadron's night-flying.) According to the Court this led to confusion leading to a lack of proper lighting arrangements on the night of February 24.

Finally, the Court found that Pilot Officer Whitmarsh should not have passed out from No. 11 Flying Training School until he had received further experience in night-flying.

In its recommendations the Court drew the attention of Flight Lieutenant Byrne to his error of judgement in permitting an inexperienced pilot to fly in blackout conditions. It also recommended that the flying training of backward pupils at No. 11 Flying Training School should be reviewed.

The Court considered that all civilian claims for deaths and injuries should be met out of public funds, together with compensation for damage to property.

In another recommendation the Court thought that no disciplinary action should be taken against AC1 William Officer, an instrument repairer, who had removed and repaired a defective altimeter from the Blenheim on his own initiative.

Squadron Leader John Miller, Officer Commanding No. 145 Squadron, was the officer in charge of night-flying on February 24. The Court recommended that his and Flight Lieutenant Byrne's attention be drawn to the fact that failure to provide a leading light may have contributed to the accident. A permanent leading light affixed to buildings

**The task of clearing the wreckage begins.**

**Croydon closed in 1959 with the intention of developing the site for industry and housing. This estate was started in 1965 and now blocks the view across the aerodrome from the upstairs bedroom of the rebuilt No. 45.**

in the vicinity of aerodromes similarly situated to Croydon was also recommended and the Court's final recommendation was that the arrangements for night-flying at Croydon should be reorganised and that those in charge of aerodrome control and lighting should be allocated more definite responsibilities.

In apportioning responsibility for the accident the Court was of the opinion that Flight Lieutenant Byrne had committed an error of judgement in permitting Whitmarsh to make a solo flight under the prevailing weather conditions. The Court considered that Squadron Leader Miller was also guilty of an error of judgement in thinking that the boundary lights were an adequate substitute for a leading light. Those lights were about 200 yards inside the perimeter of which the back garden fence of No. 45 Foresters Drive formed part.

In forwarding the Court proceedings to Headquarters, Fighter Command, the AOC, No. 11 Group agreed with the findings and found that Flight Lieutenant Byrne was primarily responsible for the accident; however, he did not recommend disciplinary action. Squadron Leader Miller also shared responsibility in the AOC's view who also submitted his opinion as to the unsuitability of Croydon for flying training.

Sir Hugh Dowding forwarded the Court proceedings to Air Ministry and in a covering letter dated May 4, 1940, stated that he thought both Byrne and Miller had been leniently dealt with by the AOC of No. 11 Group. He concluded by saying that the completion of runways at other aerodromes had rendered the occupation of Croydon unnecessary and it would revert to the status of a satellite.

At Air Ministry the Director of Training submitted a precis of the Court proceedings to the Air Member for Personnel. In so doing he referred to Whitmarsh as an unsuitable pilot who was taking-off from a bad aerodrome on a very dark night with no adequate leading lights. No further action was taken by Air Ministry and the case was closed.

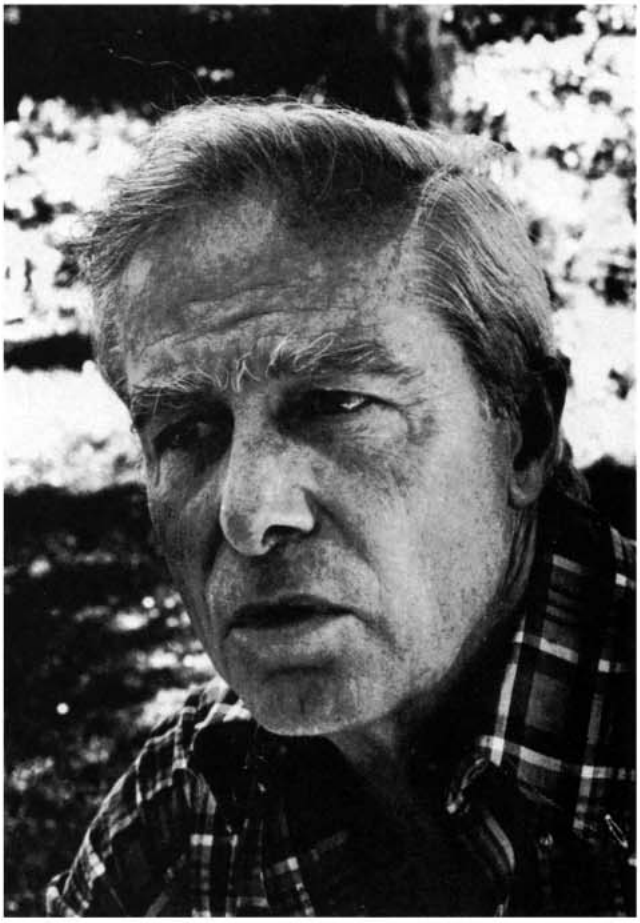
Whitmarsh was buried in the Efford Cemetery at Plymouth on February 28, 1940; Mrs Bridge and her daughter, Jill, were cremated on the same day at Norwood Crematorium. Attending the Bridges' funeral, which took place at 4.00 p.m., was Flight Lieutenant Byrne accompanied by Pilot Officers Williams and Hargreaves, both of No. 92 Squadron. Three wreaths were sent by the Royal Air Force: from the CO and officers of No. 92 Squadron; the officers and airmen of RAF Kenley; and the warrant officers and men of RAF Croydon. After the funeral Byrne expressed the sympathy of the CO and all ranks at Croydon to the Bridge family and enquired after the health of Montague Bridge, who was too ill to attend the funeral or to receive visitors.

Two postscripts to the accident were recorded. On the evening of February 24, PC J. Herner was working in the telegraph room at Croydon Police Station when news of the crash came through. As he took down the details he remarked to a friend that it was 'jolly near' to his aunt's house and within seconds discovered that in fact his aunt and young cousin were among the injured. So affected was he by the news that he was allowed off duty and immediately proceeded to Wallington. He later identified the bodies. It was only by chance that he was on duty having been sent as a replacement for a sick colleague.

Flight Lieutenant Vincent Byrne was posted to No. 74 Squadron in the late spring of 1940. Whilst on an offensive patrol over Calais and Dunkirk, his Spitfire was shot down and he was reported missing. It was later confirmed that he was a prisoner-of-war.

One conclusion appears paramount: Reginald Jervelund Whitmarsh should never have reached the stage of flying solo in a Blenheim at Croydon during the hours of darkness. His shortcomings had been noted but in spite of them he was posted to an operational squadron. From then on circumstances made him the instrument when, on February 24, 1940, he took-off on his first solo night flight in a Blenheim that was also to be his last.

**Reginald Whitmarsh lies in the company of 479 other service burials scattered throughout Plymouth (Efford) Cemetery, his grave, No. 428, lying in Section A.**



# THE DEATH OF JOACHIM PEIPER

## AFTER THE BATTLE

### CRIME IN WWII

Three days before Christmas 1956, Joachim Peiper, the last of the forty-three prisoners sentenced to death out of all seventy-three defendants found guilty at the Malmedy Massacre trial ten years previously, was released from Landsberg prison in southern Germany.

Joachim Peiper (or Jochen as he preferred) had commanded the key spearhead thrust of the 1. SS-Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler in the Battle of the Bulge *(see After the Battle No.4)*, which made him a central figure in the Malmedy case following the recovery of the bodies of seventy-two American soldiers from a field near the Baugnez crossroads just outside Malmedy and allegations of other atrocities alleged to have been committed by Kampfgruppe Peiper against American soldiers and Belgians in the Ardennes.

Born in Berlin in January 1915, the son of an army officer, Peiper received a typical middle class education, at the end of which he failed to pass the Arbiter (the equivalent of A Level or university entrance). A member of the Hitler Youth, at eighteen he joined the SS Cavalry, a branch of the SS founded by Himmler to attract 'socially respectable' recruits, and a year later (in 1934) applied to be considered as an SS officer candidate. He entered the SS Junkerschule Braunschweig (Brunswick) in 1935 and was commissioned an SS-Untersturmbannführer in the spring of 1936, being posted to the Leibstandarte. In the assessment of army psychiatrists before his acceptance at Junkerschule, he was considered intelligent though mistrustful of others; he appeared to possess a strong will and tended to act quickly and impulsively. His efforts at impressing people with his 'connections' did not escape comment, and the possibility that he could prove a critical and difficult subordinate was also noted.

For a period between 1938 and 1939 Peiper was transferred to Himmler's personal staff (his duties involving on one occasion accompanying Himmler on an inspection that included witnessing gassing experiments on live humans). His brother became an officer in the SS-Totenkopfverbände, and two of his future brothers-in-law were SS officers, one in the SD.

During the attack on Poland in September 1939 he was assigned to Hitler's military headquarters, but returned to active service and, as a company commander, was awarded the Iron Cross First and Second Class in the invasion of the Low Countries and France in 1940.

Peiper fought with the Leibstandarte in its 600-mile penetration into Russia in 1941 and against the Russian counter-attacks of the winter of 1941-42. As an SS-Sturmbannführer (Major), after the Leibstandarte had returned to Russia early in 1943 from refitting and re-organising in France, he was commanding III Abteilung of the division's SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment 2 when he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for having taken his battalion well beyond its objective and established and held a bridgehead across the River Mscha, an action which contributed towards the recapture of Kharkov.

A piece of Peiper folklore to illustrate the cool bravery that stood him in good stead with his men is an anecdote which tells how he knocked out an oncoming T-34 Russian tank with a rifle grenade, and of him turning to the troops alongside with a grin and 'that should do for the close combat badge, lads'.

In November 1943 Peiper was given command of the Liebstandarte's tank regiment, SS-Panzer Regiment 1, and a month later his reputation as a resourceful and successful young commander was enhanced by his leadership of a Kampfgruppe in the Zhitomir sector during XLVIII Panzer Korps operations to disrupt the Russians' offensive plans. In the course of a few days the Kampfgruppe advanced thirty miles and sent four army headquarters packing, burning down the village of Pekartschina in the process, and for carving this swarthe through the opposing forces Peiper received the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross. Some 2,500 Russian troops were claimed to have been killed; three were taken prisoner.

Prior to this, the division had spent two months in northern Italy and, after a further six months in Russia, was sent to Belgium to refit, being transferred to Normandy in July 1944. In December, grouped to the west of Bonn, near Euskirchen, the LSSAH comprised

*Left:* **Joachim Peiper as he was featured on the cover of the Waffen-SS old comrades magazine in 1982.** *Right:* **Pictured just before his death in 1976. (Marc Paygnard)**

**Peiper, defendant No. 42, at the Dachau mass trial (see After the Battle No. 27).**

part of Sepp Dietrich's recently formed 6. Panzer-Armee, which with Manteuffel's 5. Panzer-Armee was intended to strike through the Ardennes for Antwerp, cutting off the Allied armies to the north. For his Kampfgruppe's exploits during the offensive Peiper gained the Swords to his Knight's Cross.

According to Peiper, the first he heard about a large number of American prisoners having been shot was on the morning of December 18, the day after the incident. His recollection of the Kampfgruppe's chance sighting of a column of American vehicles travelling south on the road from Malmedy to St. Vith and belonging to Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, from which almost all the prisoners were taken, was that at the time firing broke out he had paused to interrogate an American prisoner. Hearing the commotion, he had gone to the head of the column and, he said, when he realised the minor threat posed by the convoy, ordered his troops to stop wasting ammunition and damaging valuable vehicles. More concerned, he indicated, with pressing on to Ligneauville than with mopping up around Baugnez, he had ordered the spearhead forward.

Precisely what did happen at Baugnez, and why, may never be satisfactorily resolved. Medical examination revealed that most of the bodies recovered at the crossroads had multiple bullet wounds to the face, chest and abdomen; some had wounds in the temple, forehead and behind the ear, and the majority of these were single wounds.

Evidence relating to the Malmedy case was originally assembled by the US Inspector General's Office of the First Army and the SHAEF Standing Court of Inquiry established in August 1944 to investigate allegations of war crimes against Allied personnel. The First Army report was completed on January 27, 1945, and three days later the SHAEF court proceedings opened in England at a building belonging to the US military hospital at Harrogate, Yorkshire. The court concluded that an 'unprovoked, deliberate and brutal' killing had taken place at Baugnez of soldiers whose surrender had been accepted. It also suggested that there were grounds for suspecting that other alleged crimes had been committed in the area in which Kampfgruppe Peiper had operated, and among the questions the court raised was whether a general order had been issued to German troops taking part in the offensive for prisoners to be shot.

As the Wehrmacht were put into the bag after the defeat of Germany, SS-Standartenführer (Colonel) Peiper was picked up having got to within about twelve miles of his home and put into a PoW compound at Freising, about twenty miles north of Munich. (The LSSAH had fought against the advancing Red Army in Hungary and Austria, surrendering to the Americans at Steyr in May 1945.) He was first interviewed by the senior member of the Malmedy investigation team assigned by the head of the Investigation Section of the War Crimes Branch, United States European Theater, in late August 1945.

Peiper was on record as having said that he had transmitted an order from divisional headquarters which stated that the collection of prisoners was to be left to the infantry following behind and that this was not a task for the forward armour. The order was also said by Peiper to have warned of possible resistance by the Belgians which, if it occurred, was to be countered 'ruthlessly'. However a statement he made on March 11, 1946, during the investigations that preceded the trial, referred to orders from 6. Panzer-Armee having been among the material handed him at a divisional command post meeting of December 14 when he was told of his role in the forthcoming offensive. In this statement, Peiper described these Army orders as containing exhortations to recall the victims of Allied 'terror' bombing and as stating that 'enemy resistance had to be broken by terror'.

In a statement made during April, Sepp Dietrich insisted that, although his Army orders contained some of the phrases purportedly used by Hitler at Bad Nauheim on December 12 when the Führer had harangued his army and corps commanders to fight 'hard and recklessly' and to 'act with brutality' and without 'humane inhibitions', he had neither ordered nor implied that prisoners were to be shot. SS-Brigadeführer Fritz Krämer, his Chief-of-Staff, who had himself drafted the Army orders, stated that he had emphasised the necessity for speed and ruthlessness and for any civil resistance to be broken by terror but claimed that prisoners were mentioned only in so far as they were not to be the concern of leading elements but were to be left for follow-up units to deal with. The commander of I. SS-Panzer Korps, SS-Gruppenführer Herman Priess, dismissed Hitler's address at Bad Nauheim as propaganda; he had not considered, he maintained, that it inferred a change in fighting methods in the West and could not recall anything in 6. Panzer-Armee orders indicating that prisoners of war were to be shot.

The American General Military Government Court consisted of a bench of eight officers, one of whom was a 'law member' able to advise on legal matters, and its proceedings were governed by the military procedures laid down. These procedures could perhaps be described as intended to enable ordinary justice to be done, fairly and expeditiously, with due regard for the legal process but without undue obeisance to every legal nicety.

Statements by the accused introduced by the prosecution contained allegations which implicated individuals in excesses against American prisoners and Belgian civilians; there were instances of orders which were alleged to have been issued, directly or indirectly, which contravened the laws and usages of war; and to this comparative mass of evidence was added the testimony of American survivors or eye witnesses and that of some of the local population.

No depositions were made that placed Peiper at the scene of the Baugnez crossroads incident itself, but statements were made implicating him in other killings.

The defence argued unsuccessfully for two separate trials, one for those accused of issuing unlawful orders and another for those accused of carrying them out. An indication of the pitfalls involved in representing more than seventy defendants, where accusations against one tended to rub off on all, came later, when, partly to forestall further mutually antagonistic testimony, and after failing to limit the prosecution's cross-examination to matters raised by the defence, their chief American defence counsel advised them to rest their case — a suggestion which the defendants and their additional German lawyers decided against.

Shorn of all rhetoric, central to the case the prosecution set out to prove, was the thesis that the defendants' guilt permeated every strata. From the highest level downwards, it was contended, the Führer's wishes had been transmitted as they were interpreted via 6. Panzer-Armee orders; these had passed down through corps and divisional level and culminated at company and platoon level, varying in their expression between commanders, as shown by the statements.

(voir planche 19)

**Paulat, Bodo**

avant 1945 : lieutenant de police ; a servi dans le sinistre bataillon de police 251, qui, notamment, était stationné en Norvège au mois de mars 1941

après 1945 : commissaire principal de police et chef du secteur de police de Bad Gandersheim

**Peiper, Joachim**

avant 1945 : Obersturmbannführer SS (n° 132.496) ; membre des Waffen-SS avec le même grade ; responsable de la destruction par le feu de la localité de Boves en Italie, dont il donna l'ordre au titre de commandant d'un régiment de blindés de la division blindée SS « Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler » ; responsable de l'assassinat de 71 prisonniers de guerre américains désarmés au sud-est de Malmédy, au mois de décembre 1944

après 1945 : condamné à mort par un tribunal militaire américain, peine commuée plus tard en 25 ans de réclusion, remis en liberté en 1956 ; il a travaillé aux entreprises Porsche ; puis, il est devenu chef de publicité d'un magasin de vente de Volkswagen à Reutlingen

**Poethke, Herbert**

avant 1945 : Hauptsturmführer SS et lieutenant de police ; en 1941, il a servi dans un commando d'intervention à l'Est

après 1945 : commissaire supérieur de police à Mönchen-Gladbach

**Pötke, Karl**

avant 1945 : capitaine de police et führer

**Entry in the 'Brown Book' published in the German Democratic Republic listing alleged former war criminals living or working in Western Germany.**

When Peiper occupied the witness chair, a few minor witnesses had preceded him following the testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Hal D. McCown, who, as a major, commanded the US 119th Infantry Regiment in the Ardennes. Called by the defence, McCown made the point that throughout the three days 150 of his men were held captive at La Gleize the Kampfgruppe's soldiers had treated them humanely, and, when he was cross-examined, that in his estimation, the Germans were guilty of the sort of abuses of the Geneva Convention, such as using prisoners for carrying artillery ammunition, of which the Americans could also be accused. McCown, who had escaped after being held by Peiper as a bargaining counter for the German wounded and medical attendants left behind at La Gleize along with the American prisoners and wounded, testified to Peiper's impressive professional skill and to Peiper having mentioned to him that nine American prisoners assigned to working duties had been killed while trying to escape.

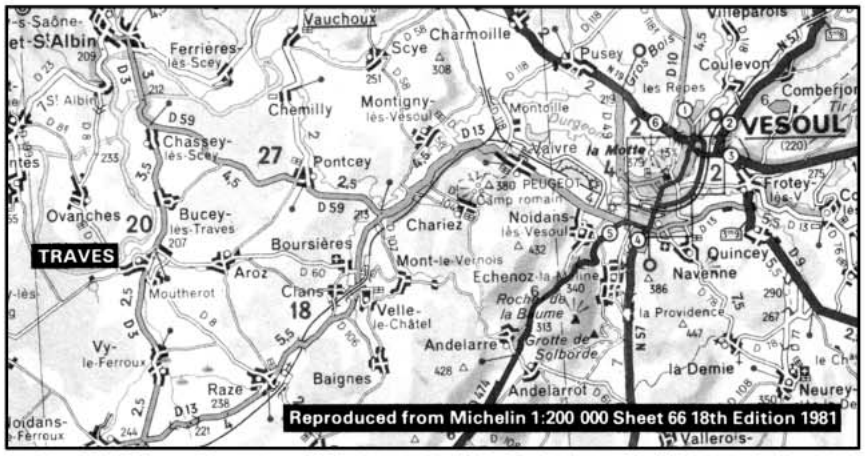
In court, Peiper sought to establish that major portions of the statements he had made previously were untrue. He spoke of five weeks' solitary confinement in a darkened cell without exercise, implying that he was psychologically at a low ebb when questioned and prey to the kind of tactics whereby he was told outright that there was simply no chance of anybody such as himself ever gaining his freedom, that the great days were over and done with, and that his duty now lay in alleviating his men's sufferings by accepting personal responsibility for the crimes attributed to the Kampfgruppe. This, he claimed, had led him to express a readiness to sign whatever would help free his men.

He denied having issued orders for prisoners to be killed or that permitted them to be killed. When questioned as to his statement in March 1946 regarding his comment that it was 'obvious' to experienced officers that 'prisoners of war should be shot when local conditions should so require it', he explained that this had not been made in the context suggested in the statement as it had been written. An admission he had made to the existence of an order received by the Kampfgruppe which encouraged terrorism and the shooting of prisoners had been made, he insisted, as a result of his being confronted by four young officers, one his ex-adjutant, who had insisted that this was so. In the wake of persistent contradictions and with his interrogator having dwelt on the way in which Dietrich, Priess and Krämer had already 'confessed to everything', Peiper claimed that he had permitted a statement to be read over to him which he signed though unwilling to do so without reading it through carefully, which he claimed he was not given the opportunity to do when it was whisked away, nor allowed to make revisions when an English version was finally furnished which he rejected, he said, as false.

The Liebstandarte's divisional commander, SS-Oberführer Wilhelm Mohnke, who in the final days of the war was in Hitler's Berlin bunker, could not be traced. Regarding his pre-attack injunction to Peiper to 'fight fanatically', Peiper made it clear that Mohnke was referring explicitly to Hitler's faith in the Leibstandarte if they were to win, and to the Kampfgruppe fighting in the way that was expected of it — i.e. without thought of self-preservation; nothing more sinister than that.

Peiper had forbidden the leading elements of the Kampfgruppe to halt for anything, but the tactical order received from the division, he testified, stated that prisoners were to be disarmed and left where they were or directed to the rear for the troops behind to collect, and he had, he told the court, discussed the procedure for picking up prisoners with the panzergrenadier unit behind.

The circumstances of his apparent admission to having sanctioned the killing of




**Shortly after his release from prison in 1956, Peiper sought a safe haven in eastern France. In 1959 he purchased a plot of forest land just outside the small village of Traves, west of Vesoul. There he had a small house built and he moved in with the permission of the French authorities in 1972.**

**Peiper managed to avoid public identification for four years but in May 1976 the Press got onto him. After two telephone calls, a local journalist, André Moisse, succeeded in getting to see him . . . it was the last interview. (Marc Paygnard)**

**The house having been gutted by fire, the same garden seat was still in situ, charred and rotten, when we visited the burned out ruin in July 1982.**

prisoners at La Gleize who had refused to conform and to having a prisoner shot at Stoumont were said by Peiper to have been similar to the previous occasion. Faced with several former members of the Kampfgruppe, one of whom he thought was on the point of nervous exhaustion, all saying that he had issued orders for the shooting of prisoners at Stoumont and La Gleize, and demoralised by what he despairingly saw as the disintegration of the Kampfgruppe's wartime spirit of pride and comradeship, rather than as evidence of his own guilt, he had resigned himself, he said, to signing a statement which became a damaging part of the evidence against him. Professing to know nothing of prisoners having been shot at either place, Peiper added that he had, in fact, been informed by his interrogator that one of his battalion commanders had admitted to issuing orders for prisoners to be shot at La Gleize, and he reiterated that, in keeping with his concern to take responsibility for the Kampfgruppe's actions and thus aid his men and improve their lot, he had therefore assumed responsibility himself.

(Numerous Belgian witnesses, who were in the villages during the Kampfgruppe's march, have stated that no senseless killings took place in La Gleize or Stoumont.)

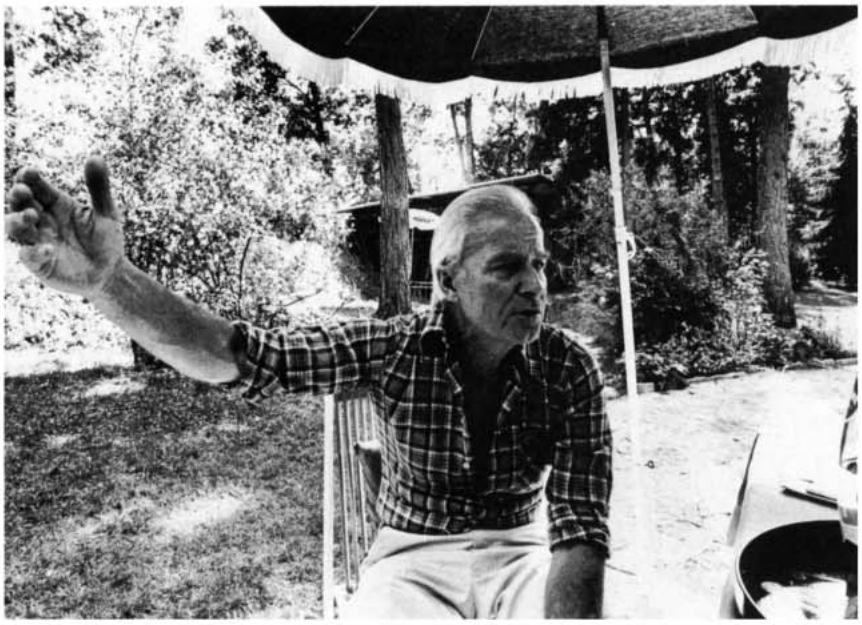
A firing squad assembled during the final days at La Gleize was not, he explained, to shoot American prisoners but to deal with a soldier from SS-Panzer Pionier Kompanie 9 who had been caught removing the SS runes from his collar and who was executed as a deserter.

Peiper recounted how at this time the commander of I. Abteilung, SS-Panzer Regiment 1, who was killed in Hungary in 1945, had told him that some prisoners had been shot while trying to escape — eight Peiper thought. He would, however, he candidly admitted, have had the prisoners shot if his surrounded forces had been forced to fight to the finish at La Gleize since he could not have countenanced the prospect of some 150 Americans being re-armed to fight the day after he and his men died there. 'I could not take the responsibility for that towards my commanders', he declared.

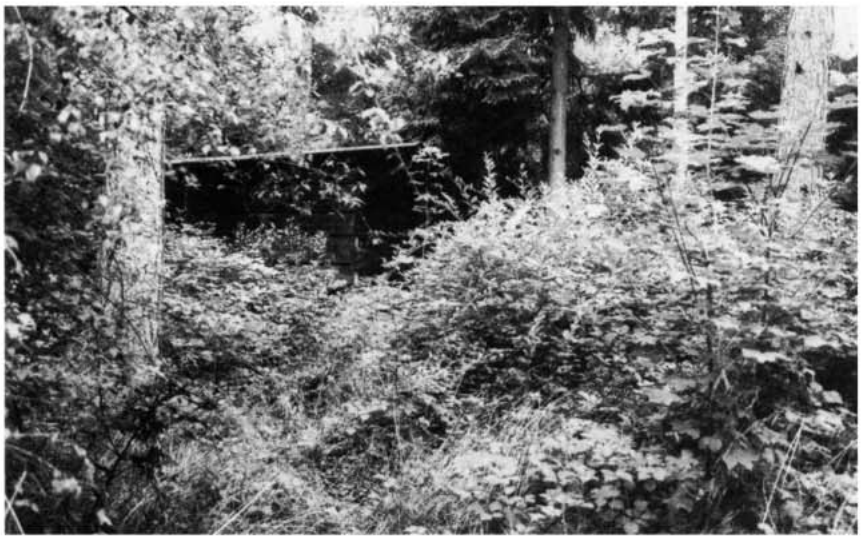
One of the two SS soldiers who had half-carried the starved and frost-bitten American to Peiper's command post at the chateau of Blanche Fontaine south-east of Wanne at Petit Thier described how Peiper, after examining the prisoner's pay book and receiving unintelligble responses from the man, exchanged glances with the regimental surgeon after being asked by the German soldier whether he should take the prisoner upstairs to the first aid station. The surgeon had allegedly then indicated towards the door with his thumb and ordered the American to be taken outside and disposed of, which he was. Both Peiper and the surgeon accepted the essential outline of the soldier's statement, although Peiper, in stating that he had not gone against the surgeons ostensible opinion that the man, having spent a fortnight in the woods, was beyond medical treatment, denied that he had ordered him to be shot.

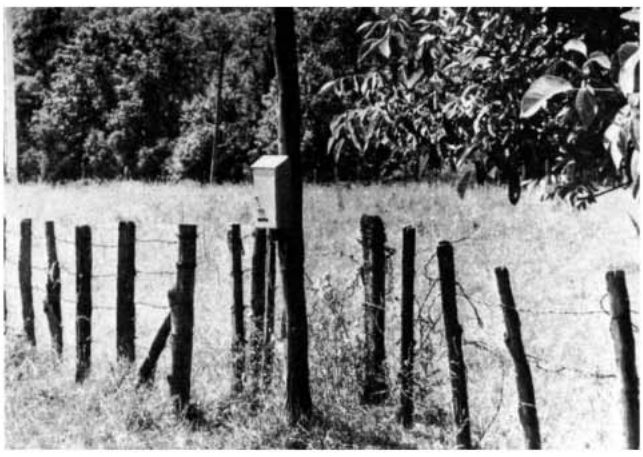
Given the exigencies of total war, Peiper denied all knowledge of unarmed Belgian civilians having been deliberately shot.

A good deal of Peiper's direct evidence was taken up with a summary of the Kampfgruppe's operations — a tactical analysis which sufficiently impressed one of the bench that he recalled it as one of the best he had



**The house was completely surrounded by forest, almost invisible from the road. Today the wood shed is still intact.**





**Only the post box beside the lane and power line to the house betrayed its position. The fence has been renewed.**

heard. Peiper, dressed in field grey SS officer's uniform, devoid of insignia, and wearing outsize American combat boots, cut more than a stereotype figure characterised by arrogance and ruthlessness. Within the courtroom and elsewhere, a fluent use of English enabled others to quickly perceive his intelligence coupled with an incisive wit. He was regarded as courteous and managed to conduct himself with a degree of dignity and composure in difficult circumstances.

In a final statement which he asked the court for permission to make, he referred to a conversation 'on a personal, human plane' in which he had asked the chief prosecuting counsel if he 'personally really believed all the things I am accused of here'. The immediate objection by the prosecution that this could have absolutely no bearing on the case itself, though perhaps legally correct, was set aside, and the court listened to what Peiper had been about to say.

That the trial had been a travesty of US military justice, with confessions obtained by methods of brutality, was borne out by the American counsel for the defence who subsequently made every effort to right what had taken place. A brief investigation had been carried out under the auspices of the Theater Judge Advocate at the time of the trial which claimed to have uncovered little evidence of brutality during actual interrogations, although freely admitted by the prosecution were the 'legitimate tricks, ruses and stratagems known to investigators', such as stool pigeons, false witnesses and mock trials . . . and a black hood was produced in the courtroom at the outset.

The now-discredited Dachau trial served only to satisfy the victors that retribution had been made, regardless of guilt being proven, and further confused attempts to get at the true facts of Baugnez. The popular version — that when Peiper and the others were confronted with the truth they fought by every means, including lies and contradictions, to escape the truth — is more or less the opposite of the now widely accepted view of the trial: that faced with a pack of lies the defendants struggled, without any chance of success, to at least get a little nearer the truth. Whatever crimes Peiper may have committed in Belgium, Russia or Italy, no conclusive evidence was produced to prove his direct involvement at Malmedy.

In the dispiriting aftermath of all the defendants having been found guilty of the charges brought against them, in letters to his defence counsel (part of a correspondence over many years) Peiper looked back on life and, employing the Wagnerian imagery that the Nazis made their own, wrote of how, ignoring the men in the dock, his true comrades were all dead and awaited him in Valhalla. He openly bemoaned that in the hour of Hitler's need the Liebstandarte (formed as the Führer's bodyguard regiment) had been kept by fate from Hitler's side. The war for him he described as having been a period in history when wherever he stood was German soil and his domain stretched for as far as his tank gun would reach. In defence of his men, he wrote to his counsel that his unit had comprised youngsters who were the products of a system that had equipped them for nothing else other than to fight fervently for their country — right or wrong.

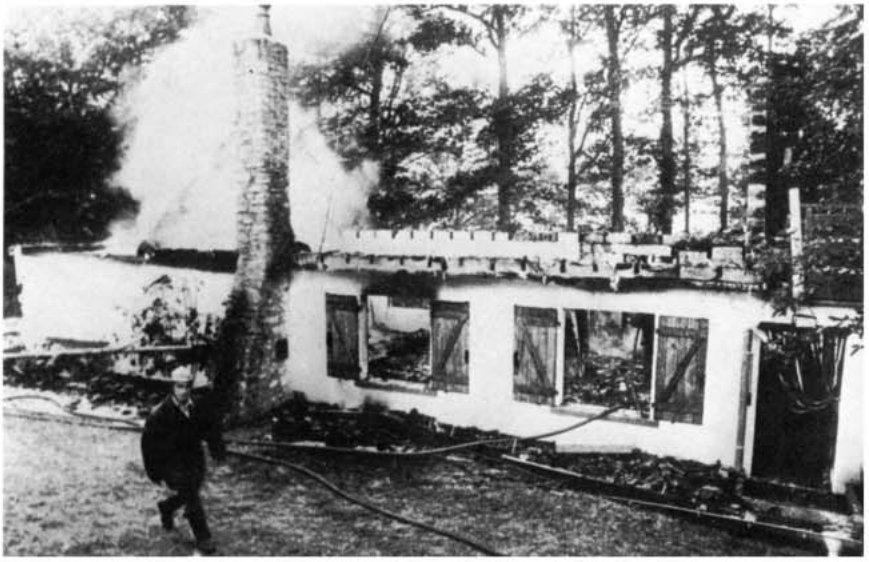
Following the number of reviews, enquiries and investigations that the Malmedy case spawned against a post-war background of controversy over the quality of justice at Dachau and allegations of ill-treatment beforehand, the number of defendants under sentence of death stood at the end of 1950 at six. With Allied military government having come to an end, and German newspaper criticism unfettered, in the changing political climate of western Europe the six remaining sentences were commuted to life imprisonment in February 1951. Advocates of the prisoners release continued to voice their dissatisfaction . . . the Allied High Commissions were disbanded . . . the responsibility for recommending clemency or parole passed to a board consisting of representatives of the three former occupying powers and three representatives of the German Federal Republic . . . and in 1954 Peiper's life sentence was reduced to thirty-five years.

When Peiper was released two years later he was almost forty-three. Employed by Porche (who had built the Panther) as manager of American sales, he again came under the public spotlight in 1964 regarding his panzergrenadier battalion's attack in September 1943 on the Italian town of Boves, in the Piemonte, while the Leibstandarte was involved in the early phase of anti-partisan operations. Two of his men had been captured by the Italians, and in the German attack on the town thirty people lost their lives. A lengthy inquiry did not produce sufficient evidence for charges to be laid against Peiper, but the protests of migrant workers — Italians among them — meant the loss of his job with Porsche and later with Volkswagen at Reutlingen.

**As a result of the publicity to Peiper and Traves, visitors were left in no doubt as to the direction of his house — drive up the road with the label! Can you feel the eyes watching you — like we could? (Marc Paygnard)**

In 1959 Joachim Peiper purchased a small plot of land in eastern France near the little village of Traves, twelve kilometres west of Vesoul. There he had a small house constructed in the woods on the bank of the River Saône and, after being granted a five-year EEC residential permit by the regional Prefecture (in full knowledge of his identity and reputation), he moved there in 1972. He and his wife lived on his service pension supplemented by his work as a translator of mainly military history books for a German firm. The Peipers lived a relatively quiet life, visited by their children and German friends. To the locals, Peiper appeared very much typical of his ilk — reserved, aloof perhaps, and 'sehr korrekt'. About a hundred yards away lived a more outgoing German neighbour in a large, almost Bavarian-style mansion with whom the Peipers were friendly and who was more a part of the community; otherwise they kept themselves pretty much to themselves, and in these peaceful surroundings Peiper kept a couple of dogs and built nesting boxes and feeding troughs for the birds.

The first ripples to disturb this tranquility



**July 14 and morning light revealed the full extent of the fire. Virtually nothing remained of the interior. (Keystone and Marc Paygnard)**

**After the police investigation the building was abandoned to nature. Vegetation can take quite a hold in six years — our visit was timed for July 1982.**

began to emanate in 1976 when a local ironmonger in Vesoul who served Peiper with nails, wire netting and suchlike, and who happened also to be a communist, opened his 'Brown Book', an East German publication listing alleged war criminals and Nazis said to be living in West Germany, and came across Peiper's name. (No such listing, it may be noted, exists for the German Democratic Republic.)

On June 22 of that year a sensational article appeared in the French communist newspaper *L'Humanité*. Like the articles which followed, it was based on fact but embellished or distorted. Peiper was sometimes mentioned in the same breath as Eichmann or Himmler. In the furore, the damaging political capital to be made out of Peiper having been given 'sanctuary in France' was not lost sight of by the media, or of Peiper being an irritant in the smooth progress of Franco-German relations. In the area around Traves slogans were daubed on the roads asserting 'Peiper-SS'; placards were posted and leaflets distributed. Peiper's letter box, on a post beside the lane seventy-five yards from his house, was broken into and he received threatening notes and telephone calls despite his number being ex-directory. His residence permit was not due for renewal until February 22, 1977, but a decision had already been taken, in the light of events, for it not to be renewed.

According to a neighbour, some friends offered to come and stay but Peiper turned them down. On July 13 Peiper's wife went to stay for a few days with friends in the Black Forest — a visit that had been arranged for some time — and that evening Peiper's neighbour came across, joining him on the terrace before returning home to bed later that night.

At 2.30 a.m. a passing motorist spotted the house on fire and gave the alarm but by the time that the fire brigade arrived, crossed the field and set up their pumps, the house had burned to the ground. (Later it was implied that their equipment had been sabotaged, but, in fact, the problem was due to lack of maintenance.) In the morning, investigations showed that the fire had been started by a petrol bomb thrown through a ground floor window. A charred body was found amidst the wreckage, and near it was Peiper's watch and an American Smith & Wesson .38 revolver together with thirteen boxes of exploded ammunition. The body, it was thought, had fallen from the first floor when fire destroyed the upstairs timbers. Peiper's two dogs were nowhere to be seen, but were found later, one with a 6.35mm bullet wound.

Outside the house, an unexploded incendiary device was found near a tree, and a drawer full of documents was lying on the lawn. A .22 rifle that had been loaned to Peiper by his German neighbour was still on the terrace. A few rounds had been fired from it, and traces made by small-calibre bullets were found among the leaves of some trees at a height of about twelve feet. That the revolver had also been fired upwards was surmised from the fact that a bullet discovered on the lawn bore rifling marks but no other disfiguration, suggesting that it had fallen back to earth without hitting anything.

A blackened torso was all that remained of the body. The autopsy revealed traces of smoke in the lungs which indicated that the victim had been alive when the fire started. There were no visible bullet wounds to the torso, which was too badly burned to ascertain if any other injuries had been inflicted. The torso was that of a man whose age and measurements were similar to Joachim Peiper, and a section of the lower jaw which was recovered and pieced together contained dental work comprising an extraction and fillings that matched Peiper's records.

After the fire, tension in and around Traves began to mount. Menacing phone calls threatening reprisals were received at Vesoul

and in the village, and the village fête, held every August, was cancelled. The Press had a field day. Stories revealed that far from being dead Peiper had set up this macabre charade to evade justice once and for all. International politics and terrorism also made for good journalistic copy — Peiper was said to have been eliminated by the East German secret service seeking to hamper relations between France and West Germany . . . another story claimed that the Baader Meinhoff gang had got him . . . and so forth.

In the course of the proceedings to verify the identity of the corpse and find those responsible for his death, the investigation not infrequently came up against the closed ranks of some of the local inhabitants. No witnesses could be found, nor any clues in the ruins of the house itself. Tracks were discerned heading across the field to where a car had been parked on the lane, but nothing could be discovered about the vehicle. Several young people were questioned, especially those suspected of being involved in breaking open Peiper's letter box, a matter which had not been pursued by the police as Peiper had not made an official complaint. One of the youngsters did in fact own up to having started the fire but retracted his admission sometime later. He was known as being psychologically unstable, and it was generally accepted that his confession had its origins in the emotional atmosphere that pervaded the area.

On the available evidence, the human remains found at the scene of the fire were accepted by the coroner as those of Joachim Peiper and were transferred to the Peiper family for burial. The mystery as to who caused his death, however, remains unsolved. Whether the attack was an attempt at intimidation, to convince Peiper that it was time he left France but which resulted in his unintentional death, or whether it was deliberate murder, is still not clear. It is, perhaps, not entirely coincidental that the event took place on the eve of July 14, one of France's most celebrated national anniversaries — Bastille Day.

*It was our intention in presenting this story to allow a reasonable period of time after the fire-bombing incident for the immediate passions of the period to die down. At the same time we hoped that more positive information might surface as to the identity of the culprits. To date, although investigations are at a standstill, the file is still open in Dijon. Nevertheless, as the passage of seven years has done little to add to our knowledge of the affair, with the opportunity to visit Traves in July 1982, we decided to delay no longer and to bring the story to its present conclusion.*

*This is not to say that strong feelings do not still exist in the village and we were warned in advance not to make our interest known or to ask any questions of the locals. This reluctance to talk and suspicion of strangers may be no more than simply the result of the notoriety that Peiper brought to Traves but, nevertheless, it did mean that research was necessary in advance to establish the location of the house to avoid asking for directions. This turned out to be a wise move for its siting must have been chosen by Peiper only after much thought about the security aspect. With the steep bank down to the River Saône protecting the rear, his view to the nearest road was unobstructed across an open field some hundred yards or so wide. No drive or footpath approached the house and only a line of posts carrying his overhead electricity cable betrayed its position in the dense undergrowth. Within the wood his plot was ringed with close-planted conifers, and wire netting was fixed to his chimney to support an ivy. Given time both would have completely hidden any sign of human habitation. His letter box, which was raided several times in 1976, was mounted on a post beside the lane, rather giving the game away, although approach from this direction was guarded by a kennel compound for his dogs. Thus, with his German neighbour a few hundred yards further west, Peiper must have felt reasonably secure and was no doubt looking forward to a few years of peace after his traumatic career when the astute ironmonger in Vesoul put two and two together and revealed the true identity of his customer.*

**The end of the road for Joachim Peiper. (Marc Paygnard)**

*There certainly was a feeling of hidden eyes watching us as we drove through Traves and out along the small road in the direction of Cubry. We knew if we reached the imposing neighbouring house, on the right-hand side of the road facing a lake, we had gone too far but luckily we spotted Peiper's chimney poking out of the trees about half-a-mile out of the village. The fire obviously destroyed the ivy covering to the stack although the netting still remains. An interval of seven years has enabled much forest growth to gain hold around and inside the roofless house although much still remains. The chairs on which the last interview with André Moisse took place still lie in place, although scorched, and two heaps of blackened refuse beside the front and back doors indicate where police sifted the charred contents for clues. The extra upper floor has collapsed but bottles of jam still remained in the cellar below. Outside the dog kennel stood silent and a remarkably intact wood shed, piled ceiling high with logs, had miraculously been spared the flames. An adjoining room of this elaborate structure must have served as a sort of games room.*

*The surrounding forest, although providing a screen for Peiper, would equally have given excellent cover to a determined band of attackers approaching under cover of darkness, and would have enabled them to come within a few feet of the house unobserved. With these thoughts in mind it was inevitable that our own ears strained to catch the sounds of anyone approaching. It was quite a relief to quit the forest and gain the sanctuary of our car, parked conspicuously beside the post which had once carried the letter box. Thankfully we were soon on our way . . . even more aware that for some there really is no hiding place.*

**The Peiper family grave in Schondorf am Ammersee, near Landsberg in Bavaria.**